THE CHANGING DEPICTION OF HOMOSEXUAL PEOPLE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITISH DRAMA

Alan Brayne.

Submitted for the qualification of Ph. D.

Submitted to the University of Warwick.

Research conducted in Department of Theatre Studies.

Submitted June 1988.

University of Warwick Library, Coventry

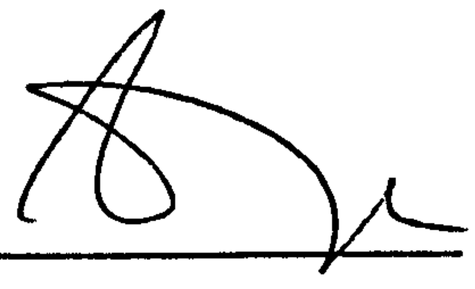
AUTHOR ALAN BRAYNE DEGREE Ph. D. DATE OF DEPOSIT 22. 11. 88

TITLE THE CHANGING DEPICTION OF HOMOSEXUAL PEOPLE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITISH DRAMA

I agree that this thesis shall be available in accordance with the regulations governing the University of Warwick theses.

I agree that the summary of this thesis may be submitted for publication.

I agree that the thesis may be photocopied (single copies for study purposes only) YES/~~NO~~

AUTHOR'S SIGNATURE 

.....

User's Declaration

(i) I undertake not to quote or make use of any information from this thesis without making acknowledgement to the author.

(ii) I further undertake to allow no-one else to use this thesis while it is in my care.

DATE	SIGNATURE	ADDRESS
7/10/92	Corrected	209 Albany Rd Coventry
8/2/94	S.Stanes	167, Elm Tree Ave, Coventry.
10/5/94	Lucy Symons	58A Clemens Street Leamington
25/10/95	Amy Holland	5 Baker Arc, L/Spa

sja/dlg/libdecfm

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY

This thesis studies how the image of homosexual people has evolved on the British stage during the present century. It aims to discern general trends rather than compile an exhaustive list of plays containing homosexual characters. Similarly, it is not intended to be a compendium of homosexual playwrights, but will focus on the contents of the drama rather than the biographical details of authors' lives. It makes no attempt to analyse work that is not ostensibly homosexual which could be argued to contain latent homosexual content. Nor, finally, does it discuss phenomena of interest in this field which are tangential to the area of study - for example, cross-dressing in pantomime and music hall. At the risk of superficiality, it concentrates on plays that have tried to discuss homosexuality and depict gay characters in an open, straight-forward manner.

The approach taken to the subject has been historical and sociological, linking developments in gay drama to the social and political situation facing homosexual people throughout the present century. As such, this thesis argues for the existence of seven stages in homosexual drama during this time. While plays cannot always be fitted into a rigid chronological schema - some overlap clearly occurs - the history of homosexual drama can be briefly summarised as follows:-

1) *Silence.*

2) *The first plays depict homosexual characters, but these are generally censored heavily or closed down.*

3) *Plays begin to raise the subject more boldly, but only by portraying characters who are wrongly accused of homosexuality or about whose sexuality there is left some doubt.*

4) *Homosexual characters are depicted openly as such, but they conform to degrading stereotypes.*

5) *Gay people break away to create their own separatist drama, generally intending to proselytise in favour of gay rights.*

6) *Mainstream plays on the West End and television begin to feature gay people in an unsensationalised way.*

7) *AIDS arrives and dominates homosexual drama.*

Although this study concentrates on British drama, theatre is now an international phenomenon, and this has been especially true of gay drama. Therefore, it has often been necessary to refer to the drama of other countries, in particular America.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS A HOMOSEXUAL?

The answer seems obvious: a person who has sex with someone of the same gender. Yet this common-sense definition runs up against a host of difficulties. Should it include everyone who has known same-gender sexual experience to the point of orgasm: over a third of the male population according to Kinsey?[1] If not, at what point should a line be drawn, and how can this be anything other than arbitrary? A definition of 'homosexual' based solely on sexual experience excludes those who think of themselves as homosexual and yet have no sexual contact. What is more, such a definition implies that sexuality is a quantifiable object which can be measured in terms of genital contact. This is at best a half-truth, for a touch or a kiss or even a smile can, in the right circumstances, carry more sexual meaning that any amount of genital activity. The subjective reality of sex can never be quantified.

In practice 'homosexual' is generally defined by one of two criteria: sexual behaviour or self-definition. The former excludes the young who have no sexual experience, people unable to find sexual partners, and those enjoying intimate relationships which contain no physical element. However, many of these people may still think of themselves as gay. On the other hand, a definition of 'homosexual' based completely on how people label themselves excludes all those who have same-gender sex but do not consider themselves to be homosexual.[2]

These problems arise from a misguided attempt to categorise humanity into two mutually-exclusive groups, homosexuals and heterosexuals.

Such a crude dichotomy bears little resemblance to behavioural reality since people cannot be pigeonholed in this simplistic fashion; Kinsey's research proves that many people enjoy both heterosexual and homosexual experiences. Nor can this behavioural truth be accommodated simply by the creation of a third category, 'bisexual', or even by a gradation as detailed as Kinsey's own.[3] These may come closer to reflecting the sexual habits of our society in quantitative terms, but offer little help in describing how sexuality is subjectively structured and perceived.

The source of this muddled thinking is a belief in the 'homosexual', a biological species existing prior to social conditioning. This sexual essentialism assumes that a concrete reality, 'the homosexual', is acted upon and modified by environmental factors, but exists before them in some pure, instinctive sense. Social and historical influences are thereby reduced from a formative to a decorative level; they merely shape the sexual drive rather than construct it.[4] But the opposite seems nearer the truth. Human sexuality is not rigidly fixed, and develops along the channels which individual societies dictate and allow.

Recent theorists such as Plummer[5] and Weeks[6] have tried to remove the study of homosexuality from this biological framework and place it in a historical one. They point out the error of treating a modern gay American and a well-bred Athenian of the Golden Age as identical beings masked by surface differences. Human sexuality can never be taken out of its social context, for it is a set of biological acts given different symbolic meanings in each society. To argue this is not to deny the universality of homosexual desire, or that people whom Kinsey would have labelled 'exclusive homosexuals' have existed in

earlier ages. It is to contend that sexual roles are the product of social forces, and that the role of 'homosexual' is a modern construction specific to Western society over the last one hundred years.

If it is essential to take a historical approach when discussing homosexuality, it is just as vital to treat male homosexuality and lesbianism as separate phenomena, and not as mirror images of the same form of love. The different behaviour which society demands of men and women affects every aspect of their personality, including their sexuality. At its crudest this manifests itself as the famous 'double standard' where men are rewarded for behaviour which is punished in women. But there are far more subtle pressures placed on both genders by society's sexual symbolism, and these are influential on every level: psychological, social and historical. Lesbians and gay men have separate histories to draw on, varying options open to them, and different restrictions to curtail them. Their daily experience of oppression takes different forms. Any serious analysis must of necessity consider what is unique to each gender.

However, male homosexuality and lesbianism are clearly linked, in that both are expressions of the same-gender love and sex which Western society has always condemned. The historical links which have existed between the lesbian and male gay movements enable a researcher to attempt a general, all-embracing history of homosexuality. This particular thesis will tread a precarious middle path, trying to stress what is unique to each gender, but combining them when this seems more illuminating or efficient.

If sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, is structured differently in every society, any study of earlier drama must try to place texts within the broader social context of their age. Although on first glance certain plays seem to offer a rare glimpse of homosexuality in earlier periods, they are full of traps for the unwary. As present-day Britons we automatically make a set of assumptions about homosexuality, so it is all too easy to see modern characters underneath the period costume when we read Marlowe's Edward II or the plays of Aristophanes. Such an approach is deeply fallacious; neither Edward nor the effeminate Cleisthenes can justifiably be labelled 'homosexual' or 'gay'. These are modern words conveying a modern idea; the concept of the homosexual in its present, restricted sense did not exist in either Greek or Elizabethan society.

In truth, only a thesis of considerable length could do full justice to the 'homosexual' drama of earlier periods. Each historical age would need to be created in something approaching its entirety if its drama were to be comprehensively understood. The role homosexual behaviour played in each society would need to be pinned down, and some attempt would have to be made to understand that society's general sexual symbolism. This would then have to be placed against the broader backcloth of its political, economic, social and mythological systems. Only then could one risk an imaginative leap and try to describe how these characters experienced their sexuality from the inside.

In contrast, the brief over-view of earlier drama offered here has two very limited aims: to demonstrate how past drama differs from that of the present century, and to prepare the ground for the modern stage and the emergence of the first definitive homosexual characters.

Since the Athens of the Golden Age has often been eulogised as a time of great freedom for homosexual people,[7] and since it is generally cited as the birthplace of Western drama, it seems the logical place to begin any study of homosexuality on the stage. Yet nowhere is there more danger of attributing modern meanings to past behaviour, or of forgetting the vastly different society in which it occurred.

In Greece, homosexual relationships were encouraged between an older man and a youth under the ideal of paedia, which can be roughly translated as 'education'. In theory, at least, it was the duty of the older lover to act as a moral guide and mentor, instilling the highest values into his young friend. Unlike modern Western society, in which a relationship between two people of widely differing ages is seen as suspect, or even shameful, Ancient Greece welcomed this type of love as a civic good which benefited the whole of society. Lesbianism was less openly validated, but it was not condemned judging from responses to Sappho's poetry. In brief, male homosexuality was encouraged as long as it took certain prescribed forms; lesbianism had less official recognition but was nevertheless tolerated.

For the Athenians homosexual behaviour did not lead to a homosexual identity; Greek had no noun for the person we call a homosexual, merely an adjective to describe a type of behaviour. Both male partners sharing a close sexual relationship were also expected to marry and father children. This flexibility of outlook contrasts strongly with the more rigid expectations of societies built on Christian values.

Male homosexual behaviour was integrated into Athenian life, but in a form alien to modern concepts of homosexuality. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the surviving drama contains no 'homosexual' characters in the modern sense, since the species did not exist. Audiences

watching The Oresteia would know that Orestes and Pylades were lovers, but this would be irrelevant, both in terms of plot and morality. The fact that they were lovers did not make them into 'homosexuals', nor was it assumed to colour their entire character. Homosexual behaviour was not the basis for a distinctive self-identity based on sexuality.

Greek tragedy portrayed mythical and legendary events rather than domestic life, so 'personal' details such as sexuality are rarely mentioned unless they serve a function in the mechanics of the plot. Athenian theatre made little attempt to faithfully reproduce the minutiae of everyday social life; any search for a realistic depiction of the relationship between a man and a youth will therefore be fruitless. The few plays which might have proved illuminating have failed to survive, including a couple based on the legend of Chrysippus, a youth for whom Laius was consumed with passion. Euripides wrote a play about the youth's abduction by Laius, and it is likely that the same story also inspired the first play in Aeschylus' Oedipus trilogy.

However, it is fairly certain that the subject would have been treated without moral condemnation, at least not on account of its homosexual element. A fragment of another Aeschylus play, The Myrmidons, portrays the grief that Achilles feels on the death of his male lover, Patroclus. The language is physical and passionate: 'You did not appreciate my admiration of your thighs, ungrateful you were for our many kisses'.[8] There is surely no moralising taking place here. The myths supply further evidence of the integration of male homosexuality into Athenian life. Gods are often besotted with mortal youths, including the mighty Zeus himself who longed for the handsome Ganymede. Literary evidence suggests

that the upper-class Athenian accepted certain forms of homosexual attraction as normal and healthy, even to the point of believing that they were an essential part of a civilized society.

A glance at Greek comedy reveals the same lack of distinction between homosexual and heterosexual attraction. Aristophanes mocks both when taken to excess - the ideal of the Golden Mean permeated Greek thought - but he makes no moral differentiation between the two. It may be true that he lampoons the womanly behaviour of Agathon and Cleisthenes, but effeminacy did not necessarily convey any inference of homosexuality. On the contrary, The Symposium says that young men in homosexual relationships are 'the best of their generation, because they are the most manly'.[9] Clearly, the present association between male homosexuality and effeminacy did not hold true for Ancient Athens. Agathon and Cleisthenes are not figures of ridicule on account of their sexual preferences, but because they behaved in a way the Greeks considered improper for a man.[10]

In short, Greek drama lacks gay characters because homosexual behaviour was structured completely differently in Ancient Athens. Male homosexuality played an essential role in the mythological and the social fabric of the city, assisting the passage of desired moral values from one generation to the next. Most important of all, the concept of homosexual and heterosexual as a type of person did not exist. Excess of sexual passion was either to be blamed (in tragedy) or ridiculed (in comedy) but its particular form was irrelevant.

At least attitudes towards homosexuality in Ancient Greece are different enough from our own to serve as a warning against making glib assumptions. Elizabethan culture seems familiar in comparison, so the danger of drawing unfounded conclusions is all the greater. The Elizabethan attitude to homosexuality, that it is a sin too horrible to be mentioned, grows out of the Christian tradition which still lies at the root of our society in spite of secularisation. For instance, the association of homosexuality with heresy and treason, very common in Renaissance thought, found a 20th century parallel in McCarthy's America, where homosexuality was linked with the modern heresy of communism."

The existence of a play with a homosexual theme, Christopher Marlowe's Edward II, creates its own set of problems. Standing alone in its choice of subject-matter, there is every reason to suspect that the drama is a somewhat idiosyncratic piece of work. Marlowe was hardly a typical product of his day; an unorthodox thinker in politics and religion, he delighted in shocking his conventional contemporaries.[12] However, since all theatre relies on a degree of consensus between performer and audience, and Marlowe was writing for the popular stage, he could not have strayed too far from general public opinion.

Renaissance England did not have a tolerant attitude towards homosexuality. All forms of non-reproductive sex were condemned, homosexual or heterosexual, stemming from a belief in the danger of spilling vital semen and a tradition which stressed the wickedness of pleasure. Homosexuality was seen as a vice to which everyone was prone, and against which all good Christians had to fight. Alan Bray[13] points to the wide popularity of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the role that the 'sodomite' played in the mythology

of the age. This devillish figure, sincerely believed in by most people, was linked in the public mind with anarchy and social disintegration.

Yet sodomy was a sin which anyone might commit; it was not an activity peculiar to a minority of individuals. Renaissance thought was dominated by the concepts of macrocosm and microcosm, and the Great Chain of Being, systems stressing the order and unity of God's creation. Each human soul was a tiny reflection of the cosmos, containing in miniature everything that existed in God's universe. Consequently, everyone had the potential to fall prey to un-natural vice.

Strong laws against sodomy were in existence. It had been an ecclesiastical offence in the Middle Ages, and documents have survived which prescribe suitable penalties for homosexual behaviour, both male and female.[14] By the time of Marlowe and Shakespeare, sodomy had been brought under statute law as part of a larger attempt by Henry VIII to limit the power of the Church. Prosecutions were rare, however, and many of those which did take place were motivated by political rather than moral considerations.

Bray underlines the paradox: sodomy is linked with heresy, treason and anarchy in the Elizabethan mind, and yet the authorities virtually ignored it. He also offers a simple solution: the Elizabethans and Jacobeans closed their eyes to the homosexuality taking place around them in their daily lives. The image of the sodomite as a Papist infiltrator intent on subverting the realm bore no resemblance to those they encountered in their immediate surroundings. Homosexuality was institutionalised in English households, schools and universities.[15] Homosexual prostitution was common in London, and some areas of the city were gaining a

reputation as meeting-places for brief, casual homosexual contacts, including certain theatres.[16] Yet people managed to keep these two worlds, the real and the mythological, well apart. Intense hatred of sodomy and sexual unorthodoxy as a theoretical idea went hand-in-hand with indifference when it was encountered on a personal level.

This explains the apparent broadmindedness of the nobles in Marlowe's Edward II. 'His wanton humour grieves not me'[17] Young Mortimer says of the King's love for Gaveston, but indifference may describe his attitude better than tolerance. The nobles condemn Edward's love for Gaveston because it is affecting his judgement as King and could endanger the realm, but their objections are political rather than moral, and they regard Edward's sexual sins as a private matter between himself and God.

A self-identity based on sexual preference still did not exist. The words 'sodomite' and 'bugger', the closest Elizabethan language comes to modern equivalents, emphasise behaviour rather than identity. The nobles hate and envy Gaveston, so if a slang word for homosexual were available, an Elizabethan equivalent of 'queer', they would surely use it against him. But the word they repeatedly use to insult him is 'peasant', mocking the humble circumstances of his birth. The major determinant of social labelling is the class into which someone is born, so much so that the entire realm is felt to be threatened when Edward breaks these barriers and courts a mere 'peasant'.

It must also be pointed out that Isabella is depicted as Edward's rejected lover, with the implication that he once felt the same sexual passion for her that he now feels for Gaveston. Presumably neither Marlowe nor his audience saw any contradiction

in this. It is not simply that Edward was 'bisexual', a concept which would also have been meaningless to Marlowe's audience, but that sexuality was not categorised in this way in Elizabethan England. It was divided rather into legitimate and illegitimate forms, Edward's un-natural passion for Gaveston being the product of his general excess of lust.

In view of Marlowe's openness about homosexual feeling in Edward II, it is surprising that no other play of the period is as frank; (Shakespeare's Richard II is far more circumspect in its treatment of a similar theme). The satires of the period, the tracts and poems of Middleton, Jonson, Donne, Drayton, contain frequent references to homosexuality, and yet very little of this seems to have crossed over to the stage.

There are two possible explanations for this. Homosexuality may have been more shocking than Edward II would lead us to believe, so that only an iconoclastic spirit like Marlowe's would dare to raise the topic. If so, the subject would have grown even more sensitive after the coronation of James I on account of that monarch's own sexual preferences. Alternatively, the audience in the pit may have found the subject in itself uninteresting, or perhaps even meaningless. What is certain is that the Jacobean playwrights would soon have picked up homosexual themes had they been good for a piece of titillation; they were never slow to use incest to spice up their plays in this way. The difference between the satires and the drama may result from the markets they were aimed at: the former were read (and written) by literary men rediscovering Greek culture with its homoerotic element, the latter were performed to a mass audience without this learning.[18] The silence of the theatres seems to this author to prove Bray's point;

homosexual behaviour was accepted in everyday Elizabethan society by means of the pretence that it did not happen.

At best this is informed guesswork; certainty is impossible because identical behaviour does not carry identical significance in different societies. Consider, for instance, these lines from As You Like It, in which Celia describes her friendship with Rosalind:

> ... we still have slept together,
> Rose at an instant, learn'd, play'd, eat together;
> And wheresoe'er we went, like Juno's swans,
> Still we went coupled and inseparable.[19]

She goes on to say that she 'cannot live out of her company'.[20] Nowadays such intense language would definitely suggest a sexual element to their relationship, but the rest of the play makes it obvious that this is never the case. Platonic friendships of this intensity were common between women until the present century.[21] This demonstrates again the necessity of placing textual evidence within its historical context, and the constant danger of hearing ancient words with modern ears.

The moral world of Restoration drama seems far closer to our own. Sexual standards are more relaxed among the élite of the Restoration court in an age characterised by the sceptical materialism of its intellectuals and the flippancy of its fops. The search for pleasure motivates the plot of nearly every comedy of the period, and it is in these comedies that the real spirit of the age has been captured, with its materialism, rationality, cynicism and libertinism. The Court was delighting in its own

decadence, snubbing its nose at the stricter standards of the emergent middle-classes.

Attitudes to sex became more relaxed, and those towards homosexual behaviour seem just as casual. A play called Sodom, generally attributed to the Earl of Rochester,[22] sums up the mood of the age. This 'blue' parody boasts a cast list which includes Prince Pricket and Queen Cuntigratia, and tells the story of a country where a Royal Edict makes buggery compulsory. Homosexuality is no longer a sin too horrible to be mentioned, but good raw material for baiting Puritans. On the other hand, the significance of this play must not be exaggerated. As Bray points out,[23] Restoration authors loved to outrage conventional opinion, but their use of homosexuality to do so might be a literary device far removed from their actual experience.

For there is scant mention of homosexuality in the rest of Restoration drama, a pertinent fact when one considers that sex is so often the central issue of the plays. One exception is the character of Coupler in Vanbrugh's The Relapse, who makes no secret of his desire for the play's young hero. His lust is certainly exaggerated for comic effect, but the fact that it is included at all suggests no horror of homosexuality in Court circles. The hero shows some distaste at Coupler's advances, but also seems to feel genuine warmth for 'Old Sodom'.[24] He is also prepared to flirt with the old man if this helps him further his plots and schemes. Coupler's lustful lunges doubtless appeared ridiculous to Restoration audiences, but probably no more so than the efforts of ageing heterosexual rakes to seduce young heroines.[25]

Restoration comedy still shows no sign of a fixed homosexual identity in the modern sense, but a new way of structuring homosexual

desire was starting to emerge by the first years of the 18th century. This developed around the 'molly houses', clandestine meeting places for men seeking homosexual contacts. These excited the interest of Puritan organisations such as The Societies for the Reformation of Manners, and were raided periodically during the first quarter of the century. A specifically homosexual culture was springing up for the first time in the molly houses, with its own standards, customs, language and dress. Effeminate and transvestite, the mollies mark the first example of a distinctive gay subculture.

The mollies arrived a little too late to take their place in Restoration comedy. On the contrary, the modern association of male homosexuality with effeminacy which began with the mollies did not hold true for the Restoration court, as a glance at the drama proves. Many of the men in Restoration plays, with their affectations, airs and graces, sense of fashion, vanity, bitchiness and love of gossip bear all the traits which would now be used to signal a homosexual man to an audience. Yet the plots leave no doubt that these fops are decidedly heterosexual. In contrast with the other male characters of The Relapse, Coupler is a brusque, gruff, unaffected man. A connection was often made between effeminacy and libertine behaviour, but the promiscuity involved was more likely to be heterosexual than homosexual.[26]

In short, homosexual behaviour occurred in the Athens of Sophocles and the England of Shakespeare, but in social contexts far removed from those of the present century. Therefore, recognisably homosexual characters in the modern sense cannot be found in their

plays. The Restoration had become history before the emergence of something we now take for granted: people with a self-identity based on their sexual behaviour. The Mollies mark the first stirrings of a separate homosexual subculture, but it is almost two hundred years before this embryonic identity develops into the figure of the modern homosexual.

In his book, Coming Out, Jeffrey Weeks argues that the genesis of the modern homosexual role dates from the late 19th century. Before then there had been isolated examples of what we would now call groups of gay people: the entourage of certain kings, the Mollies, the 19th century gentlemen at their private clubs.[27] But these were tiny cliques with little effect on society in general. It was not until the 19th century that a new medical identity, 'the homosexual', came into being.[28]

Weeks argues that the vital catalyst was a series of scandals and court cases, particularly the trials of Oscar Wilde. The Boulton and Park Trial (1871), the Dublin Castle Scandal (1884), the Cleveland Street Affair (1889) and the Wilde trials (1895) forced Victorian society to admit that male homosexuality existed. The Labouchère Amendment of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, passed in 1885, making all sexual contact between two men illegal, created 'monstrous martyrdoms',[29] but also led to a mobilisation of liberal opposition to the law. Society could no longer evade the sin too horrible to be mentioned, burying it beneath silence and ignorance, so some attempt had to be made to integrate this dangerous fact into the Victorian view of the world. The solution

was the creation of a new sexual identity, the homosexual, a person set apart from the mass of ordinary humanity.

Scandals were the catalyst, but these were only the product of deep-rooted changes in Western society. The rapid spread of urbanisation in 19th century Britain made anonymous sexual contacts both possible and likely. Men attracted to their own sex could meet secretly, avoiding the gossip and ostracism of smaller rural communities. City life in London had always spawned this shady underworld, from the male stews (brothels) of the Renaissance to the gentlemen's clubs of the 19th century. Once urbanisation spread to other parts of the country, and rural communities no longer formed the backbone of British society, there was more opportunity for people to enjoy an unorthodox sexual life hidden from public gaze. At the same time, the idea that marriage should be based on romantic love rather than parental dictate (an idea which had been gaining in strength since at least the Restoration) was changing how people viewed close personal relationships. Duty was starting to take second place to personal desire.

Attitudes to sexuality were rapidly changing. Religion was declining as a way of explaining the world, so sexuality too began to fall under the scientific microscope. This involved only an intellectual élite, but their work was to have the most far-reaching effects. Scientific theories explaining homosexuality started to emerge, particularly in Germany, where Westphal, Ulrichs, Krafft-Ebing and Hirschfeld were the standard-bearers of the new medical model. Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter were the most important British contemporaries to follow their lead.

These authors used different terminology - urning, invert, Uranian - but were all isolating what Kinsey went on to label an 'exclusive homosexual'. The same process was reflected on a popular level by the rise of slang terms to describe homosexual men, 'pouf' and 'mary-ann' dating from the 1860s and 1870s according to Montgomery Hyde.[30] Prior to this period, sexual behaviour had been the focus for language; hence the words 'sodomite' and 'bugger' to name people accused of homosexual offences. But although sexual contact with someone of the same gender had been a mortal sin, it never led to a specific sexual identity. The polarisation of 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' into two exclusive species took place a mere century ago. A new system of structuring homosexual desire within society had emerged, a way of conceptualising sexuality that seems self-evident to modern Westerners, but is in truth unique to our century.

This radical change has been summed up with clarity and subtlety by the French historian, Michel Foucault:

> We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterised - Westphal's famous article of 1870 on "contrary sexual sensations" can stand as its date of birth - less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.[31]

If Weeks is right in his belief that a major restructuring of homosexual desire took place in our society at the end of the last century, any such change would certainly be reflected in the

theatre. If the emphasis shifted from homosexual behaviour to homosexual identity, creating the new sexual role of the invert, plays containing these people should start to appear on the stage. And this is exactly what happens, even though the original plays met with the fiercest resistance.

The first attempts to reach a medical understanding of homosexuality were made in Germany. Therefore it seems natural, even inevitable, that Germany should provide the earliest theatrical fruit of the new theories. Before studying the relevant plays, Franz Wedekind's Pandora's Box and Spring Awakening, it is first necessary to look at the ideas circulating in late 19th century Germany which provided such a stimulus for the revolutionary playwright.

Attitudes to homosexuality had been historically shaped by the Christian tradition that it was a sin too horrible to mention. However, as science began to usurp religion as a way of understanding the world, its methodology spread to all areas of life. The pioneers of sexology were men of medicine determined to break the grip of religious taboo. The most important figure with regard to homosexuality was Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-1895).

Ulrichs argued that homosexuals constituted a third sex. A homosexual man was a female mind trapped in a male body and vice versa. He attempted to overcome the inconsistencies of this Idealistic hypothesis by means of a Germanic intricacy of classification.[32] Krafft-Ebing incorporated many of Ulrichs' ideas about homosexuality into his own, more general Psychopathia Sexualis, where he suggested that homosexuality was caused by a

hereditary degeneration of the central nervous system. Both men rejected the traditional view of homosexuality as a sin indulged in through an excess of lust, replacing this moral explanation with a medical one.[33]

The new scientific ideas spread beyond the confines of a medical elite because of the popularising zeal of Magnus Hirschfeld, who devoted his life to campaigning for homosexual rights on the grounds that homosexuals were the victims of a physical disorder. In 1897 he founded the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, an organisation campaigning against Paragraph 175 of German law,[34] and trying to enlighten public opinion on homosexuality. It launched a petition to legalise male homosexuality between consenting adults in Germany, obtaining thousands of signatures. Speeches were made in the German parliament, and reform seemed likely, until the Moltke-Harden-Eulenberg scandal of 1907,[35] and finally the rise of the Nazi party in the late 1920s, crushed this push towards liberalisation.

Freud's theories of sexuality filtered through from Vienna at roughly the same time. Whatever the merits of Freud's ideas (and they can be criticised for lacking both a historical and a sociological perspective) they certainly mark a radical change in the conceptualisation of human sexuality. The central role which Freud assigned to sexuality in human life, the idea of childhood sexuality, the concepts of polymorphous perversity and innate bisexuality, scandalised conventional opinion. Freud opened the lid of a Pandora's box that the genteel 19th century had hoped to lock tight forever.

This was the intellectual climate in which Wedekind penned

his own Pandora's Box. Influenced by the socialist and psychological theories of the time, his plays attack bourgeois society for its repression of human sexuality. He wrote Pandora's Box between 1892 and 1901, as a sequel to an earlier play. However, he introduced a new character into Pandora's Box who played no part in the former work, a lesbian named Countess Geschwitz.

In a foreword to the play, Wedekind describes the Countess' lesbianism as an 'abnormality'[36] and an 'affliction'[37], words which suggest Ulrichs' medical model. In the course of the play itself, the Countess is told:

> You were uncompleted in your mother's womb, either as a man or a woman. You're not a human being like the rest of us. There wasn't enough material to make a man of you and for a woman you've got too much brain.[38]

This knitting-pattern biology is a jumbled, popularised version of the scientific theories of the time. Countess Geschwitz is a lesbian because she is a failed man, a biological half-breed trapped between the sexes; she has the brain of a man in the body of a woman. Later, when Lulu is trying to persuade the Countess to sleep with a man, she taunts her, 'Perhaps the encounter will cure you.'[39]. Once more the metaphor is medical and lesbianism is labelled a disease.

However, even though Wedekind uses what modern gays would consider an oppressive medical model, he does not depict the Countess as merely a pathetic victim. In the foreword, Wedekind explains that he made her lesbian because he saw in sexual abnormality an opportunity for tragedy rather than pathos. The Countess is the 'tragic central figure'[40] of the play because she

is valiantly struggling against her birthright of medical affliction.

The Countess shares society's horror of lesbianism, but is neither a victim nor a vampiress, the two stereotypes which have attached themselves to lesbians throughout this century. Wedekind may depict her as fighting a spiritual battle against an inborn condition (where modern thought would tend to see her struggles as social and political) but this in no way diminishes the respect we are meant to feel for her. She is by far the most noble character in Pandora's Box, Wedekind going to great pains to contrast her with the clownish Rodrigo and the self-centred, instinctual Lulu. Her love for Lulu is unselfish and enduring. She risks her own life to help Lulu escape from prison; she lets Rodrigo make love to her, even though she finds this repugnant, solely for Lulu's benefit; she finally dies trying to save Lulu's life. Her final words are those of passionate love: 'I am near you - will stay near you - in eternity.'.[41]

Although Wedekind's portrayal of the Countess was influenced by the medical ideas of the time, he was careful not to create a freak and he avoided simplistic moralising. He realised that lesbian love could be as deep, true and enduring as heterosexual love, and he knew that homosexuality did not taint the whole moral character. In these respects, his portrayal goes beyond the boundaries of the age in which it was created and measures well against most things written since on a lesbian theme.

Pandora's Box reflected the theories of the scientific and medical vanguard, but it portrays an everyday world which is chokingly hostile towards homosexuality. This hostility is automatic, instinctive, complete and impossible to avoid. Even the Countess, in spite of a lively intelligence and her independence of

outlook, never once criticises society's condemnation of her, or questions whether her lesbianism is such a terrible affliction. There is no evidence of homosexuals being viewed as a politically oppressed minority, even in the work of a committed socialist like Wedekind. Repression is so total that these ideas never suggest themselves, not even to the rebels of the period.

Spring Awakening is a plea for a more frank and rational attitude towards sexuality in general and contrasts the sexual honesty of a group of adolescents with the duplicity of their parents and guardians. Many aspects of sexuality are touched on during the course of the play, including homosexuality in a short love scene between two boys. The mood of this scene is gentle and loving; one boy tells the other 'I love you, Hans, as I've never loved.'.[42]

Clearly, this is not just two adolescents indulging in sexual experimentation; it is also their first taste of love. The feeling will not last, and neither boy may actually grow up to be homosexual. As Hans says, 'If we think of this evening in thirty years time - perhaps it'll be too much to be spoken.'.[43] Wedekind makes no moral judgement on the boys' behaviour, since the point of his play is to stress the healthy, natural quality of all forms of sexual love. Far from disapproving, he draws the scene with exquisite tenderness, even to the point where it borders on the idyllic:

> But now - it's beautiful. Glowing mountains. Grapes hanging to our mouths. The warm wind kissing the rocks - caressing and stroking.[44]

Homosexuality is certainly no affliction here. It is an expression of love and joy, and Wedekind's acceptance of the boys' homosexual passion is all the more astounding when contrasted against the fear and loathing of homosexuality that existed in the society to which he belonged. Wedekind blamed the older generation for the shame attached to sexuality, especially the bourgeois classes who were weighed down with sexual repression. It is this ignorance and hypocrisy that he was attacking when he wrote the play.

On first glance there appears to be a discrepancy between the way Wedekind treats female and male homosexuality. Whereas the latter is depicted without shame, even idyllically, in Spring Awakening, lesbianism is still talked of in terms of 'illness' and 'affliction'. Yet there is no more condemnation of lesbianism in Pandora's Box than there is of male homosexuality in Spring Awakening. Equally, the biology used to explain lesbianism in Pandora's Box could be applied to male homosexuality. After the hostility shown towards Spring Awakening, Wedekind may have added the foreword to Pandora's Box in an attempt to forestall possible censorship; the respectable shield of science might be raised to deflect moral criticism. If Countess Geschwitz is a character who looks ahead to later drama simply because she is openly depicted as lesbian, Wedekind's general attitude in both plays anticipates the viewpoint that informs the bulk of gay drama after 1969.

In short, then, homosexual behaviour has been integrated into different societies in various ways. This is patently obvious

when discussing a culture as exotic as Ancient Greece but is also true of periods from English history notwithstanding certain superficial similarities. Most important of all, a fact which we take as self-evident and not requiring proof - that there are, and always have been, specific individuals called homosexuals - is not a universal truth but a way of structuring sexual behaviour particular to the last one hundred years.

Wherever one places the origin of the modern homosexual subculture, as early as the Molly houses or as late as the Wilde trials, it is the German theorists who were responsible for isolating and labelling the person we now call a homosexual. On both a popular level (pouf, fairy) and an intellectual one (urning, invert) the homosexual emerged from the silence of history during the last half of the 19th century. Before this date, people's sexual behaviour had not been used as a way of creating a distinct socio-sexual identity. A polarisation of opinion occurred, with the new scientific outlook in direct opposition to traditional moralism (although unconsciously accepting many of its basic tenets). These two ideas - homosexuality as vice and homosexuality as illness - recur throughout 20th century drama, the medical model eventually winning out over its older rival. Wedekind's astonishing plays are the first both to assume the medical metaphor and to respond to the new restrictive sexual identity. Countess Geschwitz can arguably be termed the first homosexual character in world drama.

Having traced a broad, sketchy history of homosexuality and of the effect this history has had on the drama of its time, we are ready to study British drama at the turn of the century. Before

doing so, however, it is necessary to discuss the use of the word 'homosexual' as a noun during the course of this thesis. This seems to run counter to the argument at its foundation that there is no such thing as a 'homosexual' in a fixed, universal sense.

However, this use of 'homosexual' as a noun is purely a label of convenience to avoid the inelegance of circumlocutions such as 'people who label themselves as gay' or 'people whose sexual experience is predominantly homosexual in nature'. In absolute terms, I do not believe in the homosexual as a biological reality existing prior to social conditioning. In everyday life, though, the effectiveness of social labelling depends on the fact that a label comes to feel natural and inevitable. The homosexual may not exist as a biological constant; but as a historical, social and personal reality s/he most certainly does.

SECTION 1

1900 - 1945

1. THE SILENT MINORITY

Homosexual men faced a grave situation in turn-of-the-century Britain. A vague law stood on the statute book: Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 making any homosexual contact between two men, in public or private, an offence liable to up to two years imprisonment with hard labour.[1] The Wilde trials left an aftermath of panic and despair. Thousands fled to the Continent, never to return, and those who remained needed to behave with extreme caution now that prosecution was a constant threat. Nevertheless, these people had at least stepped out of their social limbo and were no longer invisible men. The public spotlight on the Wilde trials picked out a new species in its glare, linguistically captured in the invention of a fresh piece of slang to describe a homosexual man: an 'Oscar'.

Like Germany, Britain had its isolated rebels and intellectuals. In 1883, John Addington Symonds published an anonymous essay on 'sexual inversion'. In the same year, the poet and theorist, Edward Carpenter, influenced by the Calamus section of Walt Whitman's Leaves Of Grass, published his own book of poems, Towards Democracy. The new discipline of sexology had its British representative in Havelock Ellis. Carpenter, too, lectured and wrote on what he termed 'homogenic love', and in 1914 the two men founded the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology, which had a subcommittee on homosexuality. These thinkers tended to adopt the new medical model of homosexuality, believing in some variation of a third-sex hypothesis.

The task facing these men was enormous, for sexual repression

seemed even more severe in Britain than in Germany. Writers found it almost impossible to be open about sexuality and resorted to all manner of subterfuge in order to protect themselves when they did. Havelock Ellis published his Studies in the Psychology of Sex in German to avoid prosecution. After the Wilde trials, Edward Carpenter's work was turned down by everyone except the Manchester Labour Press. Wilde himself amended the more explicit passages of The Picture of Dorian Gray, and was compelled to write Salomé in French after the Lord Chamberlain refused to grant it a performing licence.

Furthermore, the work of these men was virtually unknown to the general public, whose sole knowledge of homosexuality came through famous scandals and trials. The Cleveland Street Affair had been particularly influential, since it linked the aristocracy (Lord Somerset) and even royalty (Prince Eddy, second in line to the throne) with a homosexual brothel. The trials of Oscar Wilde had been the greatest cause célèbre of all and dictated public perceptions of homosexuality for the following fifty years.

Victorian society was dominated by the fear of scandal, which generally meant sexual scandal. All forms of extra-marital and non-reproductive sex were looked on with horror (hence the excessive efforts taken to prevent masturbation) and male homosexuality stood at the top of this dunghill of Victorian vices.[3] Before passing sentence at the Wilde trial, Mr Justice Wills called the trial 'the worst case I have ever tried'[4] and in his charge to the jury went on to say, 'I would rather try the most shocking murder case that it has ever fallen to my lot to try than be engaged in a case of this description.'.[5] People danced in the streets on hearing of the

conviction and sentence. In all sections of society, from the privileged few to the working masses, the level of hatred, ignorance and fear was astounding.

Wilde's real mistake was getting caught. Montgomery Hyde argues that Wilde's arrest was deliberately delayed in the hope that he would flee abroad, as others had done. But Wilde refused to accept this offer and shattered Victorian values for a second time in the process; not only had he been found out, but he also turned down the chance to sweep everything under the carpet. Furthermore, he had broken Victorian class barriers by mixing socially with working-class youths, a fact the prosecution made much of during his trial.

Passages of The Picture of Dorian Gray were read out in court as evidence, and even a story which Wilde had nothing to do with but which happened to be in the same magazine as some of his collected aphorisms. This is proof of the stifling restrictions placed upon literature at the time; the prosecution lawyer's philistine interpretation of The Picture of Dorian Gray could never have succeeded in court had it not reflected a widespread mistrust of serious literature. A wide array of subjects could not be raised by the arts and sexuality was the most taboo of them all. What was true of literature in general was particularly true of drama, an art-form steeped in tradition and slow to introduce change.

Such an atmosphere destroyed all chance of an English Wedekind; any play mentioning homosexuality would never have reached the stage. Wedekind may have been a radical, but at least channels existed through which his startling plays could be printed and performed. There were no such channels on this side of the North Sea, and the office of the Lord Chamberlain as censor ensured a theatre of extreme

conservativism. A contrast between the work of Wedekind and Wilde sums up the different situations in Germany and Britain. Wedekind, in spite of difficulties with the authorities, could at least argue his case for a more open attitude towards sex; Wilde was forced to avoid all direct mention of the subject.

Personal differences between the two men accentuated this divide. As a homosexual, Wilde would have placed himself at great personal risk by supporting homosexual rights. The two men's attitude to literary success were in marked contrast. Wedekind seemed content to exist on the fringe of respectability, recognised by a few radical thinkers; Wilde needed universal admiration as he strutted the public stage.

On the Continent, it was common practice for plays to be published without first being staged. Spring Awakening, written in 1890/91, had to wait until 1906 for its first production. Pandora's Box was originally published as a piece to be read, complete with author's foreword. In contrast, Wilde was being commissioned by theatre managers to provide texts for immediate performance (and needed the money to pay off debts). Consequently he had less freedom to be controversial and could only criticise Victorian society by implication rather than by direct assault.

Finally, the two men had different political beliefs. Wedekind was a committed socialist who saw his theatre as a weapon in the battle against the bourgeoisie. He was particularly concerned with the way bourgeois society warped and repressed human sexuality and what we would now call 'sexual politics'. Wilde was an aesthete, an individual of intellectual and artistic passions rather than political ones. Although he held views which might broadly be termed 'socialist',

his ultimate stance was apolitical; art took place on a higher reality transcending the mundane concerns of politics.

For these various reasons, Wilde's plays form an interesting contrast with those of Wedekind. Wilde had a direct personal knowledge of homosexuality and yet did not feel able to broach the subject openly. If it were to shape his plays, it would have to do so on a deep, unspoken level.

In general, this thesis discusses plays only if their homosexual element is explicit. This rule is broken for the work of Oscar Wilde, partly because he is such an important figure in gay history, but mainly because his plays provide a perfect example of the severe restrictions under which British drama laboured during his lifetime. A cloak of silence smothered all mention of homosexuality, creating a form of censorship all the more complete for being informally imposed. Coded messages were the only way to sneak anything past the Victorian censor.

Wilde wrote five plays in all, four 'comedies of manners' and the 'symbolist' play, Salomé. His comedies of manners portray the aristocratic society of the day, its subtle, suffocating control over its members, and the fear everyone felt of being excluded from this élite. Appearances were all in this polite, mannered world, and anyone who had stumbled morally, and had publicly been seen to stumble, became an outcast: as is Mrs Erlynne in Lady Windermere's Fan and Mrs Arbuthnot in A Woman of No Importance. Scandal is the ghost stalking the Victorian feast, the spectre haunting Wilde's plays, constantly threatening to lurch out from behind the flippant mask.

The threat of scandal dominates Wilde's comedies, particularly An Ideal Husband, where Sir Robert Chiltern faces blackmail and ruin on account of a morally dubious action which launched his sparkling career. It is difficult not to see a parallel between this character and Wilde, for both are highly successful men threatened with public exposure of a guilty secret; (two young men named Wood and Allen had tried to blackmail Wilde, using letters he had written to Lord Alfred Douglas which had fallen into their hands).[6] In An Ideal Husband, the guilty secret is a sordid business deal since sexuality of any persuasion was taboo on the stage (even Ibsen's Ghosts had been received as 'an open drain ... a loathsome sore').[7] Yet no great leap of the imagination is necessary to transfer the significance of Wilde's play to the sphere of sexual morality.

At the heart of Wilde's comedies lies the conflict between the mask of convention and the personal reality hidden behind it. This sense of living a lie has always been acute for homosexual people; even in the present day most prefer to conceal their sexuality. In Wilde's day there was little alternative. If the closet door opened, as it did on Wilde in 1895, the reaction was hatred, ridicule and fear. With a prison sentence to accompany the social disgrace, it is hardly surprising that homosexual men chose to hide behind a mask of normality. This speech from Lady Windermere's Fan shows the desperation with which the mask was kept on and the awful consequences if it slipped:

> You don't know what it is to fall into the pit, to be despised, mocked, abandoned, sneered at - to be an outcast! to find the door shut against one, to have to creep in by hideous byways, afraid every moment lest the mask should be stripped from one's face ...[8]

In a society which demanded such high public standards and yet condoned appalling behaviour as long as it took place behind closed doors, one could not help but be a hypocrite:

> For twenty years I have lied to the world. I could not tell the world the truth. Who can, ever?[9]

Of course, in the context of the plays, these speeches never touch on sexual matters; they chart a fall from grace in other spheres. However, some of Wilde's sentences almost demand to be interpreted in sexual terms:

> Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility and all the other seven deadly virtues.[10]

Wilde's experience of hiding his homosexual behaviour from the world made him keenly aware of the cost in personal happiness that his society exacted from those who fell below its strict public standards. He recognised the hypocrisy which underpinned these standards and his plays advance a more complex, compassionate morality. His heroes and heroines are not the stiffly moralistic men and women with conventional views but the victims of this self-righteousness. Yet Wilde's criticisms of the age, camouflaged beneath his brilliant wit, fall short of the direct confrontation of a rebel like Wedekind. This was subversion rather than revolution.

However, there are a few glimpses of open rebellion, occasional moments when an impatience with compromise rises to the surface, as in these defiant lines of Sir Robert Chiltern:

> I tell you that there are terrible temptations that it requires strength, strength and courage, to yield to. To stake all one's life on a single moment, to risk everything in one throw, whether the stake be

> power or pleasure, I care not - there is no weakness in that."

Nor is there much sense of compromise in this speech from Lady Windermere's Fan:

> But there are moments when one has to choose between living one's own life, fully, entirely, completely - or dragging out some false, shallow, degrading existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands.[12]

Wilde knew these moments well, even enjoying their precarious pleasure: 'feasting with panthers' as he liked to call it. His behaviour during his trials can best be understood in this light. He instigated proceedings against the Marquess of Queensberry knowing that if they failed he himself would be standing in the dock.[13] He had several opportunities to flee to the Continent but declined to do so. This was partly due to conceit; famed for his charm and wit, Wilde seemed to think a bravura performance in court would be enough to win the day. Both he and Lord Alfred Douglas were extremely naive about the legal system and Wilde foolishly imagined he could woo a jury as easily as he could delight a theatre audience. Nevertheless, he was a man of great intelligence and must have realised the peril in which he was placing himself. These are hardly the lines of an author who under-estimates the power of scandal:

> Scandals used to lend charm, or at least interest, to a man - now they crush him.[14]
>
> Think of the hypocrite with his greasy smile penning his leading article, and arranging the foulness of the public placard.[15]

The leading articles during Wilde's trials more than lived up to the picture he paints here. He may have placed his head in the

noose of his own free will but he was hardly unaware of the consequences.

There was a conflict in Wilde between his hunger for acclaim and his rejection of Victorian values. He revelled in public adulation, enjoying the limelight of literary fame, even though he recognised that these honours depended on a false public image. He acquiesced in the double standards of his time and yet produced this brilliant, spontaneous defence of homosexual love during his trial:

> It is that deep spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect ... It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as "the Love that dare not speak its name", and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine ... There is nothing unnatural about it.[16]

Salomé, the Wilde play for which the Lord Chamberlain refused to grant a licence,[17] and which was eventually produced by Lugné-Poë at the Théâtre de L'Oeuvre in Paris, offers some idea of the kind of play Wilde might have written had the British stage not been so timid and insular. Its language is sensuous and rich, its content unashamedly sexual:

> I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body; and neither wine nor apples can appease my desire. I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire.[18]

In a theatre where this kind of sexual passion could be given free rein, Wilde might have written a play that touched on his personal homosexual experience. The contrast between the cool wit of the comedies and the sensuality of Salomé underlines what the Continent - particularly the Mediterranean with its Greek heritage - suggested to homosexual men of the period. It conjured up a world

released from the stifling puritanism of Victorian England where they could live freely and openly. This sensuous paradise was a somewhat idealised vision of countries dominated by Catholicism, but for thousands of Victorian homosexuals it represented the sole chink of light in a life of secrecy and shame.

Wilde's comedies of manners are interesting for what they fail to say. They demonstrate how ruthlessly all mention of sexuality was suppressed in Victorian England and the tortuous methods writers had to use to make any serious comment on the subject. Mention of homosexuality was unthinkable in such an atmosphere.

Wilde is an important homosexual writer because his trials mark a turning point in gay history. Their immediate effect seemed extremely negative: men in their hundreds fled for the Continent, any relaxation in the law became impossible, and advocating reform became a dangerous pursuit. But in the longer term they gave men with homosexual feelings a focus for the birth of a sexual identity. A badge from the 1970s bore the logo 'Avenge Oscar Wilde' - proof that the trials of Oscar Wilde could still stir up militant anger in gay men three-quarters of a century later.

The scientific theories of Carpenter and Ellis hardly filtered through to the general public who had to build up their view of the homosexual man from the trials and scandals of the period. The stereotyped male homosexual evolved: he was refined, artistic, rich and depraved. There was little chance for this to change, for homosexuality was tucked away from public view. The stereotype remained static until the Second World War.

A play first staged in 1933, Mordaunt Shairp's <u>The Green Bay Tree</u>,

stands almost half-way between Wedekind's era and our own and yet it paints an utterly Victorian portrait of homosexual life. Its homosexual character is portrayed as a distorted version of Wilde: wealthy, witty, decadent and amoral. Its central relationship between a rich, predatory homosexual patron and a young, working-class lad reflects the twilight world picked out briefly in the spotlight of Victorian scandals.

The Green Bay Tree begins with the curtain rising on an empty room which immediately signals the kind of person living there. 'The atmosphere of the room is one of luxury and fastidiousness'[19], the stage directions explain, 'It reflects Dulcimer's personality, his sensitiveness and delicate appreciation of beauty'.[20] To underline that this is not a healthy appreciation of beauty, but a rather perverse and affected pleasure, a further detail is added: 'To the outsider the room is artificial'.[21] The word 'artificial' contains a note of insincerity which attaches itself to the unseen owner of the room; the 'outsider' with whom the reader is invited to identify is clearly a 'normal' man who has no time for 'the delicate appreciation of beauty'.[22]

Shairp reinforces his message as soon as Dulcimer arrives on stage. The character is 'immaculately turned out'[23] and pauses theatrically before entering the room. Detailed instructions are offered the actor playing the part. 'He speaks exquisitely',[24] the stage directions advise, the word 'exquisite' conveying a sense of artificiality missing from words such as 'beautiful' or 'melodic'. However, this character is not yet the powder-puff fairy who emerges later in the century. Dulcimer is dangerous: beneath the elegant veneer lurks the lure of un-natural vice. He is 'a man who could fascinate, repel and alarm'.[25]

The first five minutes of the action quash any final doubts in the mind of the spectator. On entering the stage, Dulcimer complains about

the lack of fresh flowers in the room, puts on a pair of gloves and arranges some tulips and irises in a vase. This is followed by a lengthy botanical conversation with his manservant, Trump, after which the spectator could surely have been in little doubt. Although the word 'homosexual' is never used in the play, Dulcimer is certainly an 'Oscar'.

The picture is completed when Julian enters, 'a handsome boy in the early twenties'[26], and the two men start talking about opera and the beauty of Spring. Their relationship is plainly not the normal one between guardian and ward; for instance, Julian calls the older man by the feminine diminutive of 'Dulcie'. Again, audiences would be reminded of Wilde and his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. A love affair between equals was unthinkable, as was one in a working-class setting. The sole model available was that of a rich, older man pampering a pretty, young lad (normally of humble origins). The stereotype is essentially Victorian, an image from the hidden world which came to light during the Cleveland Street Affair.

The Green Bay Tree is the story of the struggle between Dulcimer and Leonora for the soul of young Julian. Dulcimer had heard Julian singing in a Welsh church and been so enchanted by his soprano voice that he paid Julian's father £500 to become the child's guardian. When Leonora meets Julian, she urges him to seek out his natural father and move back home. But the lure of Dulcimer's sybaritic lifestyle is too strong and Julian returns to the luxury of his legal guardian. In a fit of rage, Julian's father storms in and shoots Dulcimer dead. Having become a rich young man with a large inheritance, Julian offers Leonora marriage, but she is appalled that he can consider living off money from such a soiled source and leaves in disgust. The end of the play is a reproduction of the opening scenes, except that Julian now twitters

to Trump about flowers. Many of the sentences which Julian uses are exact repetitions of phrases Dulcimer has spoken before.

This is the stuff of Victorian melodrama.[27] Shairp's characters are reminiscent of stock figures from this genre: the wicked, wealthy villain; the young innocent in moral danger; the working-class father who has fallen from grace but repents and finds God; the pure, young girl whose love shines like a moral beacon. The plot - where a rich, wicked rake snatches a helpless, young girl from her natural parents - is a cliché of melodrama. The only difference is that the victim whose virtue is in mortal danger happens to be a boy.

Is Peter Burton correct, then, to call The Green Bay Tree 'a very simplistic play about the battle between good (Leonora, Mr Owen ...) and evil (Dulcimer, Trump)'?[28] Is The Green Bay Tree a melodrama in which the audience is supposed to hiss at Dulcimer and cheer for Leonora? It is certainly true that Dulcimer gloats with all the unrestrained glee of a villain from melodrama when he realises he has triumphed over Leonora. Throughout the play he behaves in a selfish, exploitative manner, using his wealth to manipulate people. Having already tempted a drunken Owen into selling his only son, Dulcimer maintains his hold over Julian by threatening to withdraw his allowance.

On closer inspection, though, the behaviour of the other characters is hardly more commendable. Julian is not the artless victim of melodrama whose naivety is accompanied by a strong sense of right and wrong, but a shiftless young man who drifts with the tide, unfettered by any sense of guilt or morality. If Shairp's intention had been to warn people about the moral threat posed by predatory old queens, he would surely have made Julian more innocent and likeable. It is true that Julian is meant to have been corrupted by Dulcimer's serpentine

influence, and can not therefore be expected to act like an angel, but Shairp is sufficiently accomplished as a playwright to have added glimpses of the young, unspoilt Julian had he so wished. It seems reasonable to conclude that if Julian is a victim, he is a willing one.

Nor is Owen, Julian's biological father, a paragon of natural goodness. In the past his love of drink has made him sell his only son to a complete stranger. His born-again religiosity may be a source of strength - a stage direction suggests that he 'might have gone to the bad altogether had it not been for religion'[29] - but it is easy to sympathise with Julian when he teases his father, who seethes with fundamentalist fanaticism. As Julian points out to him, 'You belong to the Old Testament! I believe you'd enjoy being an instrument of destruction.'[30]

Shairp makes a deliberate point of contrasting Owen and Dulcimer. One constant theme of the play is the clash between Dulcimer's rarefied world, with its culture, elegance and wealth, and the hard-working, upwardly-mobile puritanism of Owen and Leonora. Owen booms out passages from the Bible for moral edification; Dulcimer quotes snatches of poetry for their literary beauty. Owen drones gloomy hymns on his harmonium; Dulcimer tinkles on the piano with silky artistry. The two men's opposing temperaments - Owen's ponderous, honest literalism and Dulcimer's brilliant amorality - point to the intellectual conflict at the root of the play. However, there is no indication that Shairp intends to advocate the former and castigate the latter. His approach is essentially even-handed.

Taken at face value, Leonora is the only positive character in The Green Bay Tree. She has Owen's sense of right and wrong without his excessive zeal. She is ambitious and hard-working, and yet is not too

straight-laced to let her hair down at the cinema and opera house. Her puritanism is not exaggerated to the point where every pleasure, however harmless, becomes sinful.

Therefore, it could be argued that Leonora represents the middle way, a healthy balance between Owen's religiosity and Dulcimer's preciousness. But closer examination reveals an ambivalence in Shairp's attitude towards the character and Leonora cannot justifiably be called his raisonneuse. If Dulcimer is the stereotyped homosexual, Leonora is the stereotyped 'new woman'. Just as Julian shortens Dulcimer's name to the feminine diminutive 'Dulcie', he abbreviates Leonora's to the masculine tag of 'Leo'. Gender-roles are reversed in the world of the play, and Leonora's dominance is a mirror-image of Dulcimer's effeteness.

Leonora is enormously bossy. She is attracted to Julian because he is so aimless and malleable, realising that she can mould him into any shape she desires. From her very first entrance, she plots towards her goal of complete domination. She manouevres Julian out of the clutches of Dulcimer (whom she immediately recognises as a dangerous rival) into the safe tedium of his father's house. She bullies him into studying to become a vet, intending to employ him in her own practice, a position in which he would automatically be subservient to her. Leonora is a successful career-woman who has set up in business partnership, an impressive achievement for a woman of poor beginnings. Audiences would have recognised in her the new, independent career-woman, a development which made many people feel nervous. Her 'masculine' drive and Dulcimer's 'feminine' pursuits are signs of a world where traditional gender-roles have started to

crumble.

Leonora may not share Owen's ferocious fanaticism, but she remains a puritan at heart and recognises a natural ally in Owen against the decadent Dulcimer. The work ethic has lifted her from her lowly beginnings, so she feels great scorn for the inherited wealth of the idle rich. Her moral values are simple and absolute; never for a moment does she doubt that Dulcimer is evil or her conviction waver that she is on the side of the angels in the battle for Julian's soul. She finds Julian attractive because his weak nature offers her the chance of a moral crusade. At the end of the play she is disappointed when she sees Julian in his true colours: a lazy, self-indulgent boy who stays with Dulcimer because it is the path of least resistance and greatest luxury. But the experience teaches her very little and the end of the relationship causes her no pain or heart-searching. She still sees no need to question the secure foundations of her moral universe.

So any interpretation of the play which casts Leonora in the role of heroine needs several major qualifications. While it is true that she finally abandons her own hopes and pleads with Owen 'Don't think about me. What we've got to do is save him from Dulcimer.'[31], it is debatable whether even this show of selflessness is meant to be taken at face value. In a deeply ironic play where all the characters are viewed with a somewhat jaundiced eye, self-satisfaction may be as pronounced here as self-sacrifice.

The best proof that <u>The Green Bay Tree</u> is not intended as a simple battle between good and evil lies in its wry ending: Owen sits in prison, Leonora has retired in righteous defeat and Dulcimer

emerges victorious, even in death. His spirit lives on in Julian, who reproduces the phrases and mannerisms he has picked up from his guardian. Dulcimer even remains on stage physically, in the form of a death-mask which dominates the room with its gruesome grin. Had the play been intended as a melodrama of good triumphing over evil, surely Leonora would have 'rescued' Julian and the two lovebirds would have settled down to married bliss. Had it been meant to sound a stiff warning against the insidious evil of un-natural vice, a tragic ending might have been more effective, a picture of a noble soul abandoned to a life of depravity. The actual ironic conclusion is the mark of a work which casts a sophisticated, cynical eye over its subject-matter, refusing to advance a simplistic moralism.

I realise that this analysis runs the risk of under-estimating the stricter sexual mores of the period. Perhaps it was so automatically accepted that all homosexuals were evil, corrupt and depraved that a 1933 audience was ready to accept Leonora as a shining example of all that was good and true. Even so, I remain convinced that Shairp was aware of the ambiguities of his text and that he wrote his play to work on two levels. Moral watchdogs (and the Lord Chamberlain) could see it as a straight-forward melodrama about the dangerous allure of un-natural vice, while more sophisticated playgoers could delight in its irony and dry cynicism.

Shairp needed to be adroit to tread what was still a theatrical minefield. Other attempts to raise the subject of homosexuality had met with strong official disapproval, both here and in America. The actress Mae West wrote two Broadway plays with homosexual

characters in them, The Drag and The Pleasure Man, but even great public interest (the first performance of The Drag was a sell-out and people stood at the back of the theatre) could not save them from the attentions of the police.[32] The Drag was a plea for tolerance of homosexuals on the grounds that they could not help their 'condition' (and owed a debt to the new sexual theorists). Homosexuality was more incidental to The Pleasure Man, a reflection of life backstage in Vaudeville, but the play included an array of flamboyant homosexual men camping it up in outrageous fashion. The dialogue sparkled with the bitchy, camp wit which West had doubtless heard during her own music-hall career.

Newspaper reviews were vituperative. 'No play in our times has had less excuse for such a sickening excess of filth'[33], Gilbert Gabriel wrote of The Pleasure Man. The Drag fared no better, Variety complaining of its 'cheap and shabby appeal to sensationalism'[34] and terming it 'a jazzed up revel in the garbage heap'.[35] In spite of a private performance for police and top officials, New York City eventually banned The Drag. A year later, The Pleasure Man was closed by police during its third act and the entire cast was arrested and charged with 'presenting or participating in an obscene, indecent, immoral or impure play'.[36] Also in the mid-1920s, Broadway was rocked by a French play about lesbianism, Edouard Bourdet's The Captive. Despite excellent reviews which recognised the play's artistic merit and the fact that the play had been a success throughout Europe, The Captive's run also ended in a police raid and the arrest of its unfortunate actors.

British censorship occurred one stage earlier. The Lord Chamberlain made sure that any plays with a homosexual theme never even reached the stage by refusing to grant them a licence.

The Captive, for instance, was denied a British production even though the rest of Europe (with the exception of Hungary) saw no reason to censor it. Faced with such a situation, Shairp came up with the solution of writing a work which existed on two levels: a melodramatic tale of a clash between good and evil camouflaging a more complex and ironic study. Officialdom had to be placated, and the Great and the Good seemed satisfied by the text's genteel evasions and Dulcimer's violent death.

Most importantly, homosexuality is never named as such. Neither the word 'homosexual' nor any slang alternative is used during the play, even though audiences could have been in little doubt as to its subject-matter. Shairp slips in a few lines which are more explicit; for instance, when Leonora chides Julian, 'I hope I shan't meet you one day in Piccadilly with a painted face, just because you must have linen sheets.'.[37] Trump's lines are equally clear when he gives Julian some advice at the end of the play: 'Mr Dulcimer always said ... that a man could never settle down until he'd got women out of his life.'.[38] Elsewhere, Owen calls Dulcimer 'evil'[39] and advises Julian to get away 'before he destroys your soul altogether.'.[40] Leonora asks Dulcimer, 'Haven't you any conscience at all about keeping him from what is normal and healthy?'.[41] Nothing could be more clearly intimated, but as long as the dreaded words are never used Shairp could escape the Lord Chamberlain's net.

For all Shairp's circumspection, The Green Bay Tree is still the most open play on the theme of homosexuality on the British stage from 1900 to 1945.[42] (The American stage was more adventurous and several attempts to raise the subject were made during the same

period.)[43] Therefore, the play deserves detailed study, since it is the only available picture of the stereotype which was building up around the new species of 'the homosexual'.

The homosexual man of <u>The Green Bay Tree</u> is a wealthy, middle-aged predator who buys and corrupts decent, working-class boys. This unsympathetic portrait had some basis in reality in the sense that only the rich could afford the luxury of a homosexual lifestyle. But even the rich needed to keep their sexuality hidden from public view, which led to an underworld of brief sexual contacts, often based on prostitution. Working-class men also found release in casual sex, but the general public had no concept of a working-class homosexual. An association was made between homosexuality and decadence, not only in this country but also in communist countries like the U.S.S.R., where Stalin extolled the virtues of 'proletarian decency'. The stereotyped homosexual belonged to the upper classes.

He behaved in a 'feminine' manner. Indeed, this effeminacy soon became the essence of the homosexual stereotype which grew more limp-wristed with every passing year. However, this 'hermaphroditism of the soul'[44] had not yet become ridiculous or pathetic. For all his affectations, Dulcimer displays a genuine appreciation of beauty and a love of culture.

Unlike Wedekind, Shairp never places homosexuality in a medical framework. The perspective of <u>The Green Bay Tree</u> owes nothing to Ulrichs, Carpenter or Ellis, for the play depicts a world where homosexuality is still a vice rather than a disease. Consequently, Dulcimer is not a victim to be pitied but a charming degenerate who revels in his decadence, all the more dangerous for

possessing style and wit.

Homosexuality may not be conceptualised as a physical illness, but it is assumed to be a type of moral disease which can be spread through close contact. Dulcimer has corrupted Julian at an impressionable age and Julian in his turn will infect someone of the next generation. This moral decline is not completely random in that a weakness must already exist within the victim, a lack of moral fibre which makes him prone to stray from the path of righteousness. Thus, Julian's downfall is quickened by an inherent lack of resolution and love of luxury. Homosexuality is not viewed as a sin which anyone could commit, as in mediaeval thought, but as a vice to which certain people are constitutionally susceptible. (The ground is clearly prepared for the replacement of this moral model by a medical one.) It is this innate weakness within Julian which Dulcimer is appealing to when he says:

> Very well, then! Go and get married! Disregard your temperament, your disposition, your everything that cries out against it! Beat out a living from the world and fashion a home for your wife, and live in it, and be happy ever after! Can you do it?[45]

The Green Bay Tree reflects the Victorian attitude that male homosexuality is a vice caused by insufficient manliness and lack of will-power. It is not inevitable, like a physical illness, but can be overcome by healthy living, a cold shower and the help of a good woman. In spite of the new medical ideas, Shairp's sexual morality still stems from religious strictures and Victorian values. Even the play's title comes from the Bible, with Dulcimer cast as 'the wicked in great power spreading himself like a green bay tree'.[46]

The play also reflects Victorian confusion about homosexuality.

When Wilde spoke eloquently of 'the Love that dare not speak its name',[47] he painted a pure, idealised, asexual love which included none of the sweat of physical passion. The Victorians in general avoided the sexual realities of homosexuality by means of euphemisms such as 'unmentionable vice' and 'lewd behaviour'. Shairp carefully establishes that Julian and Dulcimer do not share a sexual relationship, making it clear that the two men have separate bedrooms. At one point, Dulcimer tells Leonora, 'Like you, I have feelings, but with Julian in my life I am never troubled by them. He keeps them constant and satisfied.'.[48] In other words, he sublimates his sexuality through idealising his relationship with Julian. His romanticised picture of Julian remains that of the innocent choirboy he heard singing in a Welsh church, an unobtainable vision of beauty with which he torments himself. Julian does not even realise the kind of emotions Dulcimer feels for him. He fails to notice the older man wince when he levels the accusation at him, 'I don't think you've ever been in love.'.[49]

There is a paradox here which highlights the depth of contemporary confusion with regard to homosexuality. On the one hand, it is seen as a vice so heinous that it cannot be mentioned; on the other, it expresses itself through deep, platonic relationships. Dulcimer is called 'evil' for corrupting Julian and yet he has never even shown the young man his true feelings, let alone made any attempt at seduction.

This confusion is reflected in the reviews of the time which are unusually contradictory in nature. The Star seemed in little doubt that this was a sordid tale of evil, carrying the headline, 'Two Unpleasant People/which would you kick the harder?/A Wretched Youth/ And A Guardian who was Corrupt.'.[50] The Sketch, though, felt that 'Mr Shairp has obliterated any possible disagreeable impression'[51] in his

'drama of paternal feelings'[52], and describes the two men's living arrangements as a 'perfectly acceptable situation'.[53] Homosexuality, of course, is avoided by name, although The New Statesman and Nation came close with its headline 'The Pleasures of Perversity'.[54] Reviewers were united in their respect for Shairp's skill as a playwright, but apart from this they seemed to have obtained radically different messages from this (ostensibly) simple drama.

The thinkers and activists who lit the first sparks of the modern gay movement were a tiny minority; most people retained an attitude of hostile ignorance. Progress was slow and painful, leaving behind a trail of martyrs and unsung heroes. Nor was progress particularly smooth, the history of the period being a series of advances cancelled out by setbacks. For every success, such as the banning of anti-homosexual legislation in Russia in 1917, there was a frustrating failure to change the law or a piece of barbarism like the Wilde trials. Individuals like Carpenter and Hirschfeld had to display great tenacity in their attempts to alter a system that fiercely resisted all efforts at change.

Furthermore, public opinion barely altered at all. The threat of a backlash was never far away, and may indeed have been inevitable as a frightened response to new ideas. Visibility meant vulnerability, particularly in those countries where the greatest advances were made. It is impossible to give a precise date, but during the late 1920s the pendulum began to swing back. The sexual freedoms granted in Russia after the Revolution were reversed under Stalin and official Communist thinking declared homosexuality a product of bourgeois decadence to be contrasted with proletarian decency. Purges became common, mass arrests

took place in January 1934, and new laws were drawn up sentencing people found guilty of homosexual offences to eight years in prison.

Communism also betrayed the homosexual movement in Germany. After a brief flirtation with homosexual rights in 1929/30, the German Communist party became increasingly opposed to all forms of sexual libertarianism. Hitler's rise to power marked a brutal end to Hirschfeld's pioneering efforts. The Institute for Sexual Science was raided and its files and literature destroyed. The myth that Röhm's homosexuality guaranteed safety for others was finally exploded when he met his death in The Night of the Long Knives, and in 1935 anti-homosexual legislation was extended to include even fantasies. Thousands ended in concentration camps, wearing a pink triangle as a mark of their homosexuality.

Britain was spared such a brutal backlash, for the early homosexual movement never became as visible here as in Germany. A blanket of silence smothered the subject and homosexuals could live in relative safety as long as they hid their sexuality from public view. However, safety for the majority was little consolation to anyone unlucky enough to get caught. Even in a country which prided itself on leading the way in individual freedom, discovery resulted in a prison sentence and a life in ruins.

Homosexuality was invisible in Britain between 1900 and 1945 and everyone had a vested interest in keeping it that way. Since nothing was ever made public, attitudes changed very little during this period of silence. The sole image of the male homosexual remained Oscar Wilde's public persona, and the stereotyped homosexual, as portrayed in The Green Bay Tree, was wealthy, artistic, effete, immoral and sinister. The dominant influence on attitudes towards homosexuality remained the Christian tradition, even as science swept away many of the cornerstones

of traditional Christian thinking.

On the surface, then, nothing changed in fifty years. And yet subtle changes were taking place in public perceptions of homosexuality underneath this impenetrable shell. The medical model was gradually making ground at the expense of the moral one; sin was giving way to sickness. The evil corrupter of youth remained a powerful stereotype, and yet some of his wicked glamour was already fading as the more pathetic figure of the screaming queen took his position centre-stage. A small, influential group of thinkers were beginning to challenge traditional ideas about homosexuality. They had two major weapons in their armoury: the Victorian re-appraisal of Ancient Greek culture and the new, scientific theories arriving from the Continent. In terms of total numbers, this group of people was exceedingly tiny, but it contained some of the foremost artists and thinkers of the day. Knowledgeable people now had access to a small body of homosexual literature: Whitman, Carpenter, Proust, Gide, Hall.

At the start of the Second World War, homosexual rights seemed no further advanced in Britain than they were during the Wilde trials. The silent minority were as hidden as ever, coming to the public's attention only when some unfortunate individual was hauled before the courts. The theatre seemed equally stagnant. Public opinion may have thawed slightly, so that a play like <u>The Green Bay Tree</u> could reach the stage whereas <u>The Captive</u> had been banned, but Shairp still had to be careful not to name his subject too explicitly.

Given such a climate, nobody could have guessed that the second wave of the modern homosexual rights movement was about to be launched in America or that plays featuring homosexual men would become a regular feature of the West End stage within forty years. But, as Foucault

points out,[55] the Victorian age which is characterised as a period of complete sexual repression was actually the time when glacial moral standards first began to melt. Important changes were happening beneath the unchanging exterior of British society, new ideas and outlooks which would surface after 1945 and lead to the sexual liberalisation of post-war Britain.

2. WOMEN DON'T DO SUCH THINGS

The earliest theories about homosexuality were concerned with men and treated lesbianism as simply the process in reverse: a lesbian was a male mind trapped in a female body. Since most of the campaigners and theorists were men, interest centred on the male homosexual while lesbianism remained a subject shrouded in mystery.

Differences in the law were the most obvious cause of this disparity. The illegality of male homosexuality forced the subject into the public arena, even if most people preferred not to see it there. However, legal indifference did not reflect greater tolerance of lesbianism. On the contrary, the very existence of lesbianism was being denied by the silence that concealed it from public view. Feminist ideas can help us to understand why this occurred.[1]

In Western patriarchal society, the male is taken as the standard for humanity and the female exists only in relation to him. She is treated as a deviation from the male norm (Adam's rib) and becomes invested with the dangerous qualities of the unknown, the 'Other'. The anti-sexual bias of Christian thinking means that these fearful qualities become concretised in sexual terms, giving rise to two opposing stereotypes: woman as pure sexuality, evil and seductive, the source of all trouble (Eve) and woman as Madonna, unspoilt by earthly passions, the passive receptacle of sordid male desire.

The Victorian age saw the apotheosis of the second view of woman ('lie back and think of England') and a bestial vision of man. The ideal woman had no independent sexual feelings; sexual modesty was as natural for her as sexual aggression was for the male. Plainly, once

autonomous sexuality is considered a purely masculine phenomenon, lesbianism becomes a theoretical impossibility. This indeed seems to sum up Victorian opinion, typified by Queen Victoria's reputed remark that 'women don't do such things'.

Women have been granted identity only in relation to men, as either their wives or their daughters. Except for the very rich or the highly unusual, they have had no social status separate from that of the man who 'possessed' them. This meant women were denied many freedoms taken for granted by men: to go out alone; to enter certain public places; to forge independent careers. On a practical level, this made it difficult for lesbians to meet each other. On a psychological level, women were discouraged from seeing themselves as having autonomous sexual needs. The stereotyped lesbian came from the upper classes (Wedekind's Countess) because only women from that class possessed the freedom to choose to be lesbian.

Women with independent means (like the female authors of the Bloomsbury set) might afford the luxury of an all-female lifestyle, but such an option was closed to the vast majority. Homosexual men were luckier; a homosexual underworld had existed in London since at least the reign of Elizabeth I, and even working-class men could make some kind of sexual contact in the brothels and toilets of the big cities. Lesbians, who generally lacked the masculine privilege of escape from the home, were completely isolated from one another.

Women were discouraged from following intellectual pursuits, another area seen as a male prerogative. Every generation provided exceptions to this rule, of course, but it took a fine mind and a powerful personality to break into the masculine preserve of intellectual respectability. All the important institutions - the Church, the universities, the publishing houses - were dominated by men. So was

the theatre, in spite of the adulation accorded to certain actresses. Any woman who wanted to take an active role in the theatre as either writer or director had to face the full resistance of a male establishment protecting its own interests.

Women could rationalise away disinterest in heterosexual intercourse more easily. Good girls felt no pleasure in the act, so any woman who felt bored or repulsed by sex with her husband was likely to attribute this to natural frigidity. A woman had no sexual rights; once she became the property of her husband, it was right for her to accept his advances dutifully and unenthusiastically. Therefore, she was not forced to question her sexuality in the same way as a man if heterosexual sex proved unsatisfying. In addition, displays of affection were possible between two women which no-one would have dreamt of labelling 'lesbian'. This meant intense female relationships could develop without either party needing to re-adjust their sexual identity.

The early homosexual rights movement suffered from profound masculine bias. In theory Ulrichs' ideas could apply to either sex, but in practice homosexuality became synonymous with male homosexuality (and remains so to this day). The crucial events that shaped social history - the Cleveland Street Affair, the Criminal Law Amendment Act, the Wilde Trials - bore little significance for women.

The struggles facing lesbians and gay men are not identical and freedoms gained by one gender do not automatically liberate the other. Many societies which have been romanticised into idylls of homosexual freedom - Athenian Greece, the Japan of the Samurai, the Middle-Eastern courts - were intensely sexist, and one of the main reasons these societies came to value male homosexuality was their complete subjugation of women. Cultures which effectively separate men and

women into two distinct social classes cannot easily idealise love between equals in heterosexual terms. In societies where sexism is at its strongest, leading to a situation where everything male is elevated and everything female is denigrated, logic dictates that male homosexual love should become perceived as the most noble of all emotions.

The history of lesbianism, then, is one of silence rather than of criminalisation; society was still denying the reality of lesbianism, even as it isolated and labelled the male homosexual. However, during the 1920s something of a turning point occurred with the attempted introduction of a second Criminal Law Amendment Bill and the banning of a novel called The Well of Loneliness. These events were probably a confused response to the (supposed) threat of feminism rather than a deliberate attack on lesbianism per se, but they both had the effect of publicising what had previously been a concealed phenomenon.

In 1921, a new Criminal Law Amendment Bill passed through the House of Commons. This piece of legislation would have criminalised lesbianism along the lines of male homosexuality. However, the House of Lords threw out the Bill and no effort was made to re-introduce it.

During debate, opponents of the Bill argued from a position of biological determinism: deviant sexuality was of physical origin ('we are dealing with abnormalities of the brain')[2] and should not be criminalised for that reason. Others opposed the Bill for less liberal motives, suggesting that criminalising lesbianism would simply serve to publicise the perversion. Lord Birkenhead confidently stated that only one in a thousand women had even heard of lesbianism, and Lord Desart opined that innocent women should not be made aware of such a disturbing subject.

A deep sexism lies at the root of these arguments which assume that women need to be protected from the realities of life (particularly sexuality) and that men have a right, or even a duty, to make laws on behalf of women. The male leaders of society clearly felt that female ignorance was bliss and were determined to perpetuate it. They rejected the brutal suppression of law for the more subtle repression of denying sexual identity, and justified this by reasoning that women were happier in their innocence. The myth of chivalrous man protecting his womanfolk from the unpleasant realities of life had served its purpose in the past and there seemed no reason to abandon it. The alternative, to admit the reality of lesbianism by criminalising it, conceded that women had autonomous sexual desires and could, if they wished, live a life independent of men.

Had the 1921 Criminal Law Amendment Bill become law, it would have left a trail of lesbian victims in the same way as the 1885 Act created male martyrs. Happily, the terrible suffering of male homosexuals was avoided, but legal tolerance exacted its price: lesbianism remained concealed from public view.

However, the veil was lifted briefly with the banning of Radclyffe Hall's novel, The Well of Loneliness. Sixty years after the event, it is difficult to comprehend the outrage this novel caused, since it reads as a cautious, discreet plea for tolerance towards lesbians. It is gay activists who are now likely to criticise the book, pointing to the equivocal attitude the author takes towards her subject-matter and to the stereotyped central character, Stephen, who does nothing to dispel the myth of the butch lesbian. Like much modern homosexual literature, the book is saturated with misery bordering on melodrama. The Well of Loneliness is a product of the lowly expectations of homosexuals at the

time, certainly a novel which pleads rather than demands.

Even so, it was too advanced for contemporary opinion. Reactions to the novel were extreme and now seem out of all proportion to its rather mild content. Its nervous publishers withdrew the book from the market, although publication continued in France until the DPP stepped in and took the publishers to court. James Douglas felt compelled to write a cautionary piece about the book in the Sunday Express in a style which foamed with moral indignation and sparkled with unconscious humour: 'I would rather put a phial of prussic acid in the hands of a healthy girl or boy than the book in question.'.[3] When the case came to trial, the publishers put forward the familiar defence that the book dealt with medical illness rather than perversion. But the outcome was as good as decided: the moral hysteria which periodically sweeps Britain demanded its sacrificial offering and The Well of Loneliness was banned.

Interestingly enough, two contemporaneous novels dealing with lesbianism were not prosecuted, which suggests that Hall's treatment of her subject-matter caused her book to be singled out. Lesbianism was condemned in The Tortoiseshell Cat and ridiculed and satirised in Extraordinary Women. It would seem that Hall's novel was seen as subversive because she gave her characters dignity and refused to condemn their lesbianism. The magistrate in charge of the trial expressly criticised the book for drawing its characters in too favourable a light.

Nevertheless, the banning of Hall's novel had some positive effects. It brought the subject of lesbianism to the attention of an ignorant general public in the same way that the Wilde Trials had done for male homosexuality. Before The Well of Loneliness, lesbianism had

been of interest only to a tiny artistic élite; for a few frenzied weeks it became a topic of general conversation. Silence soon returned to smother the subject, but the existence of lesbianism could never be denied with quite the same conviction.

The Well of Loneliness was also important simply because it was the work of a woman who looked on herself as lesbian. Until then, even sympathetic portrayals like Wedekind's Pandora's Box had been produced by men. Women have been under-represented in virtually all of the arts, particularly the drama which saw few female playwrights until recent years. Therefore, images of lesbianism have been created by male artists and writers, which has clearly led to severe distortion. Lesbianism has become a common motif in male pornography and has often been used to spice up dreary movies (especially in the horror genre). But even work which aimed higher than this and did not cynically set out to exploit lesbianism tended to reflect male perceptions of the subject; there was not much art available that depicted lesbianism from within.

This was certainly true of a play which became a cause célèbre in the United States, Edouard Bourdet's The Captive. Bourdet himself recognised that his portrayal of lesbian passions was written from a male viewpoint: 'I have never made a study of the sort of woman discussed. They are something entirely out of a man's knowledge and always will be.'.[4]

The Captive had been a great success throughout Europe and no less a figure than Max Reinhardt had produced it in Berlin and Vienna. It had been applauded for its artistic merit and aroused little serious controversy other than a ban in Budapest. Even so,

the Lord Chamberlain refused to grant it a performing licence for Britain. Any possible controversy was thereby averted here, but events conspired to make Bourdet's play the sensation of the 1920s in the United States.

The Captive is the story of Irene de Montcel, the daughter of a French diplomat. When her father's work takes him to Rome, he insists that she join him; Irene makes excuses to remain in Paris. Irene is secretive about why she wishes to stay behind and enlists the help of Jacques, a man who loves her and hopes eventually to marry her. The couple pretend to Irene's father that she wishes to stay in order to be near Jacques, and the two of them get engaged.

Jacques soon becomes unhappy with this arrangement, though, because he knows that Irene is spending a lot of time with a married couple called the d'Aiguines and suspects that Irene is having an affair with the husband. When Monsieur d'Aiguines finally calls on him, however, Jacques is confronted with a truth which stuns him even more: it is Madame d'Aiguines with whom Irene has a romantic attachment. When he challenges Irene with this truth, she becomes distraught and speaks of the danger of her soul being 'lost'.[5] She begs Jacques to marry her so that she can be cured and he eventually succumbs to this request. Even at this point, though, there is an indication that all will not be well in the future. When Jacques pulls Irene towards him and attempts to kiss her passionately on the lips, she instinctively draws away, unable to complete an action which she finds repulsive.

Sure enough, at the beginning of the last act, set one year later, it is clear that the attempt at happy marriage is failing. Irene is a dutiful, but detached wife, and Jacques cannot bear to

make love to someone who plainly does not return his feelings. This mechanical routine finally breaks down when Irene accidentally meets Madame d'Aiguines. The older woman tells her that she is seriously ill and begs Irene to go away with her. Irene refuses, but Madame d'Aiguines persists and sends her a bouquet of violets. After a long, painful conversation with Jacques, Irene walks out and the final action of the play, as in A Doll's House, is the slamming of a door which signals the end of an empty marriage.

The critics of the day recognised the artistic merits of Bourdet's play, even though some of them did not like its content: 'Here is a play amazingly well done, that was not worth doing at all'.[c] Those merits are still clearly recognisable to the reader sixty years later. What is also striking to the modern reader (especially when we compare the play with the drama that was to follow in the 1950s and 1960s) is the mature and honest approach Bourdet took towards his subject. Bourdet sets out his story with admirable objectivity, bringing few moral prejudices with him to his script. This is a tale of passion told with obvious feeling, Bourdet treating his characters as human beings rather than as stereotypes called 'lesbians'. Most telling of all is the play's ending. There is no neat conclusion where Jacques 'rescues' or 'cures' Irene, nor is there the traditional climax of suicide. It is never made explicit, but audiences were clearly meant to believe that Irene has walked out of the house to go to live with Madame d'Aiguines. Bourdet is sufficiently honest a playwright not to twist his conclusion to serve some pre-determined moral directive.

Yet Bourdet was very careful to treat his subject with immense discretion. Lesbians are never named as such but referred to as

'shadows'; the audience learns the truth through inference: 'it is not only a man who can be dangerous to a woman, ... in some cases it can be another woman'.[7] The vital central character of Madame d'Aiguines, the older lesbian who is 'dangerous' to young Irene, never even appears on stage. It is certainly true that this is effective dramatically, but one must suspect that Bourdet also used this device to divert criticism that he was putting immoral characters on the stage. In this way, lesbianism remains a topic discussed in the abstract rather than an emotion made concrete.

There is also evidence of some stereotyped thinking on Bourdet's part. Madame d'Aiguines, described as 'the most harmonious being that has ever breathed'[8] by her devoted husband, is certainly depicted as a dangerous, alluring woman - the fatal lesbian. In her relationship with Irene, she is portrayed as the strong, dominant seducer. Irene, on the other hand, is shown as the weaker character unable to fend off a more powerful will. The actress playing the role on Broadway emphasised this by wearing a ghostly make-up to make Irene appear even more pallid. Indeed, Irene refers to herself in the play as a 'captive'[9] with no will of her own. Elsewhere, the play uses medical metaphors of disease and cure which reflected (advanced!) contemporary views of homosexuality.

But all of Bourdet's considerable powers of discretion could not redeem the play in the eyes of some critics. Arthur Hornblow (strangely enough, the father of the play's English translator) wrote a review which spoke of 'the gangrenous horrors of sex perversion'.[10] Frank Vreeland's review in The Evening Telegram spoke of 'the abnormal', 'defectives' and 'abnormal beings' which 'history will dispose of'.[11] Nor could Bourdet's skill ultimately save the

play from the New York authorities. In spite of being a critical and a box-office success, The Captive was closed down and its cast, including Basil Rathbone and Helen Menken, were unceremoniously carried off to jail.

That stage history has largely forgotten the publicity and ballyhoo surrounding these events during 1926 and 1927 speaks volumes for the bias of history, including theatre history. It also seems rather unfair on Bourdet that such an excellent play should be critically neglected for so long. It is no exaggeration to say that The Captive was the theatrical sensation of the 1920s in the United States. Its fame spread wider, so that the copy I have been using from The British Theatre Association library has a note inside saying that 'it must not be removed in any circumstances whatsoever' (presumably because of its content). The publicity surrounding The Captive had much the same effect as that surrounding the censorship of The Well of Loneliness in England. Lesbianism was brought to public attention and dragged out of the shadows. This may sometimes have allowed bigotry a platform from which to shout, but it also helped to give a sense of identity and belonging to a whole generation of lesbian women.

However, as Bourdet himself admitted, his was the voice of an outsider, a man writing about a woman; his lesbian characters were viewed from a male standpoint. The same was even more true of Jean-Paul Sartre's Huis Clos (1943). Its lesbian character, Inez, has no life of her own; both she and Estelle are reflections of Woman as seen by the male character, Garcin. Huis Clos is set in Garcin's personal hell, and the two women are puppets in his private psychodrama. Estelle is woman as sex object: feminine,

flirtatious, heterosexual, eager to please. Inez is the femme fatale, the dangerous, emasculating lesbian who refuses to accept her subordinate role.

Huis Clos looks frankly at male attitudes to women. Garcin treats both Estelle and Inez as symbols rather than individuals and judges them by whether they can be sexually conquered or not. He is superficially attracted to Estelle, for she is desperate to become his sexual property, but in the process she makes herself so easily available that he loses interest in her. Inez is the one who fascinates Garcin, for her independence threatens his masculinity. Like most men, he feels neutered by a woman who will not validate his sense of superiority by giving in to him. Not only does Inez refuse to do this, she evens set herself up as a rival for Estelle's affections. Her lesbianism is the ultimate rejection of the proper female role.

Inez torments Garcin throughout the course of the play. As long as there exists a woman whom he cannot conquer, Garcin feels emasculated; he relies on the complicity of 'feminine' women to create his self-identity. Any woman who refuses to play her part chips away at his maleness. Garcin desperately tries to prove himself to Inez because he is tormented by her dismissive laughter; he does not feel himself a man if he cannot win her, body and soul. Women are the enemy who must be conquered, the 'Other', and those who cannot be vanquished are terrifying since they steal a man's masculinity. This explains both male fears of lesbianism and their fantasies of making love to, and converting, a lesbian: it is the ultimate proof of manliness.

Huis Clos is a brutally honest revelation of male attitudes to

lesbianism. Sartre has peered inside himself and seen how he uses his relationships with women to validate his masculine identity. Gender-role is one of the foundation-stones on which people construct their sense of self and reality; at a very profound level of consciousness they are aware of themselves as being either man or woman and from this awareness develops a feeling of personal security.

So Huis Clos is about male perceptions of lesbianism rather than lesbianism per se. However great the talents of Wedekind and Sartre (and both Pandora's Box and Huis Clos are excellent plays with far more subtleties than there is time to discuss here) these works are no substitute for plays written by lesbians themselves. It would be interesting, for instance, to have been shown the infernal triangle of the enclosed room from Inez's point of view.

Lesbian activists fight two related struggles. The first is the same as that facing the male gay movement: to acclaim the beauty and normality of same-gender love and sex. The second is to free women from images of femininity created by a patriarchal society, a world in which women are the sexual property of men and are supposed to have no sexuality other than in response to them.

At least Wedekind and Sartre broke the silence. Women were unable to do so themselves because they were under-represented in the arts, particularly in the drama. The struggles of the lesbian author are inextricably linked with that facing all female artists: to create an art which is a genuine reflection of female reality and not a male distortion of the subject. The drama, especially, has suffered from a lack of female workers, making lesbianism a rare subject until the feminist movement sparked off an autonomous female drama in the 1970s. However, one woman wrote

a play on the topic of lesbianism as early as 1934: Lillian Hellman, with her successful drama, The Children's Hour.

The prospects for an American play about homosexuality, male or female, seemed far from good. As described in the last chapter, the police closed down Mae West's The Pleasure Man in the middle of its third performance. In a review in The New York Evening Post, Robert Littell had described it as 'smeared from beginning to end with such filth as cannot possibly be described in print, such filth as turns one's stomach even to remember'.[12] Bourdet's greater artistic skills had not saved The Captive from the same fate. Given these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Hellman disingenuously claimed that The Children's Hour was not about lesbianism, but about a lie. Writing against this history of censorship, she had to tread with extreme care. However, she did so with great success, for her play chalked up 691 performances and established her as one of America's leading playwrights.

The Children's Hour is about two women teachers running a private school who become the victims of a malicious accusation that they are lovers. The villain of the piece is one of their pupils, who makes up this story and tells it to her grandmother. The horrified older woman - Mrs Tilford - immediately takes steps to remove all the children from the school which then folds due to a lack of funds. The teachers take Mrs Tilford to court for libel but lose the case. Their lives and their careers in ruins, they are ostracised by the small-town community in which they live: eventually the pressure becomes so bad that the elder teacher, Martha, shoots herself. By the time Mrs Tilford discovers that the story is a wicked fabrication, the damage has been

done: Martha is dead, the school has closed down, and Karen has lost both her fiance and her best friend.

The play depicts an America which is frightened and ignorant of sex. It is something dirty and furtive, a point made clear by a scene in which a group of schoolgirls giggle at a 'naughty' book they have acquired called Mademoiselle de Maupin. The girls know virtually nothing about sex, but when Mary overhears an argument between Martha and her aunt in which the latter accuses Martha of un-natural feelings, her instincts tell her that there is something powerful about the word 'un-natural'. Later, when she is in trouble and forced to lie her way out of a corner, Mary uses the word in desperation. Though still unaware of the full significance of what she is saying, she feeds off the horrified reactions of her grandmother, gradually constructing the story that she has seen Martha and Karen kissing each other passionately.

Mrs Tilford's horror freezes her powers of judgement. She accepts the story without question and acts on it instantly. The idea of lesbianism is enough to suspend rational thinking and remove all trace of reasonable behaviour. Lesbianism is so terrible that it cannot even be mentioned by name but must be hedged around by vague euphemisms like the word 'un-natural'. This primitive taboo of naming the thing too awful to be spoken is brought out in a scene where Mrs Tilford tries - at length - to let Karen's fiance know what she has been told:-

CARDIN: Amelia, you didn't bring me here to talk about the hospital. What's the matter with you?
MRS TILFORD: I - I have something to tell you.
CARDIN: Well, out with it. (Pause) Yes?
MRS TILFORD: It's a very hard thing to say, Joseph.[13]

The evasions continue later in the scene:

CARDIN: Now it's not like you to waste your time. Or to waste mine. What did you call me here for?

MRS TILFORD: (Turns to Cardin) You must not marry Karen.

CARDIN: (Shocked, grins) Why must I not marry Karen? (Then very sharply, rises, putting drink on table) What are you talking about? Why must I not marry Karen?

MRS TILFORD: Because there's something wrong with Karen - something horrible.[14]

But this is as far as Mrs Tilford is willing to go, and she is still edging her way around the subject when Martha and Karen come in. Eventually, Cardin has to hear the allegations from their lips.

Mrs Tilford is so disgusted by lesbianism that she would prefer to avoid the whole subject. At first she refuses to speak to Karen and Martha and asks them to leave her house. Although adamant that all the girls must quickly be removed from the school, she then wants the affair to be swept under the carpet and never mentioned again. Any discussion is out of the question: 'I don't trust myself to talk about it with you now or ever.'.[15]

She can see that her reaction may be uncharitable and grudgingly concedes that 'what they are may possibly be their own business',[16] but this is an excuse to evade the subject, originating from fear. She claims that her prime concern is for the children at the school: 'You've been playing with a lot of children's lives, and that's why I stopped you.'.[17] And although Karen and Martha may be free to live as they wish, 'it becomes a great deal more than that when children are concerned in it'.[18]

Mrs Tilford's justification of her reaction is a delicious piece of irony when one bears in mind that the architect of all the misery is a monstrous adolescent who needs little protection from anyone. The old woman's mind is closed to rational discussion and she automatically accepts every popular prejudice about lesbianism. She assumes without

question that lesbians are a threat to children and should not have any contact with them, even though she knows that Karen and Martha are fine teachers who have previously taken good care of the girls in their charge.

Once the court case makes the headlines in the local papers, Karen and Martha are ostracised by their small-town community. A brief episode illustrates their isolation with impressive economy. The women's sole link with the outside world has become the grocery boy; when he visits he stands and stares at them, unable to stop giggling, until Martha puts up her hand and shouts in exasperation, 'I've got eight fingers, see? I'm a freak.'.[19]

The Children's Hour reflects the sexual repression of the period. Ignorance of sexual matters is universal and intense prejudice exists against anyone of unorthodox sexuality. A posture of self-righteousness is allied with prurient curiosity, but the strongest emotion of all is fear. Sex is something terrifying, an animal lust that must be repressed, or else ignored in the hope that it will go away. In such an atmosphere, Hellman had to be extremely careful when making a plea for tolerance of sexual minorities.

Good plays work on several levels at the same time, and the victimisation of the teachers by their repressed small-town community takes place alongside a deeper psychological study. Hellman is far too accomplished a writer to descend into melodrama and the real tension in her play comes not from the social clash between the two teachers and their local community, but from the psychological conflict stirred up within one of them.

Martha becomes the central character of the drama as soon as she begins to question her feelings and to ask herself whether she is in

love with Karen. She tries at first to distance herself from this emotion by attributing it to other people, those who have 'chosen it for themselves'.[20] 'We don't love each other. We don't love each other.',[21] she repeats, using words as sympathetic magic to banish the idea. But she is a brave, strong-willed person who will not run away from the conclusion of her thoughts. She speaks her worst fears aloud to see if they sound true once they are put into words. 'But maybe I love you that way'[22] she ventures, in a sentence which could be interpreted as either an admission or a question, or perhaps even both.

Ironically, Karen reacts like everyone else in the small-town community, with fear and evasion. She will not countenance the idea and refuses to discuss it, lamely suggesting that they forget what Martha has said because things will seem different in the morning. But Martha has set wheels in motion and will not be deflected from her search for the truth. She is discovering part of herself she has repressed all her life:

> I've been telling myself that since the night we heard the child say it. I lie in bed night after night praying that it isn't true. But I know about it now. It's there. I don't know how. I don't know why. But I did love you. I do love you. I resented your marriage; maybe because I wanted you; maybe I wanted you all these years; I couldn't call it by a name but maybe it's been there ever since I first knew you -[23]

She ignores Karen's denials and continues:

> There's something in you and you don't do anything about it because you don't know it's there. Suddenly a little girl gets bored and tells a lie - and there, that night, you see it for the first time, and you say it yourself, did she see it, did she sense it - ?[24]

Having pushed herself through this harrowing self-analysis, Martha

finally realises that she is in love with Karen. However, this knowledge brings her no sense of release, for she can only shudder with self-disgust, crippled by the shame which society attaches to such feelings: 'Oh, I feel so God-damned sick and dirty - I can't stand it any more.'.[25] Aware of her lesbian feelings, but unable to live with them, Martha commits suicide.

A second interpretation could be put on these events, a fact which reflects the artistic complexity of the play and the care with which Hellman protected it from censorship. It might be argued that Martha is not 'really' lesbian, but that the pressure of events has worn her down so much that she lets the idea prey on her mind until she believes it. However, this interpretation runs counter to several points in the text: Martha plainly is jealous of Karen's courtship, and she is not portrayed elsewhere as the type of person who collapses beneath social pressure. But to search for a simple solution to The Children's Hour - to decide whether Martha is 'really' lesbian is not - damages the play's greatest asset, its psychological subtlety. Martha's uncertainty about her feelings is the tension which fuels the drama once the external plot has run its course, and sticking a label on Martha's sexuality robs The Children's Hour of its most gripping moments.

Some of the questions that The Children's Hour touches on remain as relevant as ever and have been hotly debated within the lesbian and feminist movements. Karen and Martha have had an intense friendship for many years and their feelings for each other are certainly love of some kind. Can their relationship therefore be called lesbian? When is any relationship lesbian? To use masculine concepts of sexuality in order to categorise female relationships seems misguided, but what are the alternatives? Is Martha a 'lesbian' or a 'latent lesbian', and

what do these imprecise terms mean? All these complex (and perhaps unanswerable) questions are raised by Hellman's play, and I therefore find it impossible to agree with Hoffman when he says that the play treats its homosexual theme 'with little lucidity'.[26] On the contrary, Hellman displays great subtlety of thought without ever compromising what is basically a plea for tolerance.

It is essential to place The Children's Hour within a historical context to fully appreciate Hellman's achievement. Written in 1934, it goes as far towards 'excusing' lesbianism as would have been possible at the time. Martha can never become a lesbian apologist or the play develop into a polemic for lesbian love. Not only would this have brought the certainty of closure and prosecution, but such an approach was a historical impossibility. Drama cannot mirror realities (in this case, gay activism) which do not exist off-stage.

Naturally, if a play like The Children's Hour were written now, it would be criticised for its evasions, its compromises and its suicidal conclusion. This action strikes the modern reader as futile, defeatist, slightly melodramatic; nevertheless, it was probably the only ending acceptable at the time. The tragic ending helped to protect the play from the attentions of the court and the police and allowed it to advocate liberal tolerance of homosexuality without becoming so radical that it was closed down. As long as some sort of morality was suggested, the lesbian woman being 'punished' for her sexuality by committing suicide, the play could survive attacks from reactionary moral campaigners.

Merely staying on the boards represented a type of success. Events surrounding the play underline the sheer weight of the pressure Hellman had to face. Leading Broadway actresses refused

to take part in it, fearing that the show would be closed down and their careers permanently damaged. Rumours circulated that the text failed to win the Pulitzer Prize because one of the judges refused to attend the performance. The ending to The Captive may have been less melodramatic, but its moral neutrality had probably cost the play its public platform.

Hellman had trodden her tightrope skilfully. She never assaulted her audience violently, using dark murmurings of 'un-natural' deeds to conjure up the spectre of lesbianism. The need for caution could have seriously damaged her play, but she turned it into a source of dramatic strength. Mrs Tilford's desperation to avoid the taboo words is far more effective than any amount of invective at communicating the horror she feels. Similarly, Mary's whispered revelation of her malicious lie is a neat way of suggesting the play's central theme without spelling it out too graphically. But the action also creates a strong dramatic moment, a hissed whisper and a look of horror conveying more menace than pages of high-pitched dialogue.

The Children's Hour was one of the successes of the 1934/35 season and Hellman was widely acclaimed for having created an excellent play. The drama critic of The New York Times, Brooks Atkinson, awarded plenty of praise to both writer and director. Interestingly, though, Atkinson was deeply dissatisfied with the play's suicidal ending and felt that the evening should have concluded a quarter of an hour earlier, with a picture of Martha and Karen alone on stage facing a bleak future. The reasons Atkinson puts forward for this are dramatic, not moral, but they seem to me sound; Hellman's chosen ending may have had as much to do with

possible censorship as with dramaturgy. Also, Atkinson's review avoids the subject of lesbianism, briefly relating that the two women are accused of 'an un-natural affection for each other'[27], and makes no mention of Martha's prolonged questioning of her sexuality. Even people who enjoyed Hellman's play, it seems, were not prepared to ponder on some of the issues it raised. Needless to say, the Lord Chamberlain made sure that no-one even saw the play in England.

Like The Captive before it, The Children's Hour was a box-office success, chalking up 691 performances. Hellman had managed to raise the topic of lesbianism without alienating her audience or exciting the attention of the authorities. She had also forged a play of quality which has survived the years. Whereas The Green Bay Tree looks back to attitudes at the turn of the century, The Children's Hour anticipates the treatment of homosexuality in the theatre of the 1950s and 1960s (and was successfully revived during the early 50s). The understanding which went into the crafting of the play still shines through today, more than compensating for its disappointing final suicide.

The earliest homosexual drama was as likely to be about lesbians as male homosexuals. There was such a dearth of work on the subject that silence suppressed both genders with equal force. The medical theories treated lesbianism and male homosexuality as two sides of the same coin. But when sexual attitudes began to relax after the Second World War, the difference between the position of lesbians and gay men in society grew more apparent. Whereas male homosexuality became increasingly visible to the general public, lesbianism found it difficult to throw off the veil

of silence. Not until the re-emergence of the feminist movement in the late 1960s was much progress made in this area.

But the heady days of Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation were unimaginable in 1945, when homosexual people were putting a tentative first foot out of the closet. A struggle for rights as basic as legality occupied the next twenty-five years and this push towards liberalisation was reflected in a new wave of drama on both sides of the Atlantic.

SECTION 2

1945 - 1969

INTRODUCTION

The homosexual rights movement re-emerged at the end of the Second World War, based in America rather than Europe. The post-war years saw the creation of a number of societies acting as pressure-groups for changes in the law and as social clubs for homosexual people. The first was the Dutch C.O.C., founded in 1947, which had its own clubhouse in Amsterdam. This became a model for homosexuals in other countries and a similar group called Arcadie was soon set up in France. However, the most important advances occurred in America, which needed less time to recover from the war. Several homophile organisations sprang up in the United States: the Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis, One Incorporated, the Society for Individual Rights. Their members tended to come from the professional middle-classes and to stress this respectable background. A responsible, clean-cut image seemed essential if they were to change the law and public opinion.

Progress was still far from smooth, however. Homosexual people became visible by grouping together into campaigning societies and some sections of the population were quick to seize their chance to attack them. The big freeze of the Cold War unleashed the McCarthy witch-hunts and the two 'crimes' of communism and homosexuality became linked together. The homosexual remained an object of hatred and fear to right-wing America.

Before the war, homosexuality had rarely been a matter for public discussion. The new medical theories, both psychological

and physiological, had been nurtured in the privacy of intellectual élites. Developments forced the topic out of these small circles, however, during the 1950s. The new homophile organisations were gaining some success in their efforts to educate the public about homosexuality, even if they had to contend with the inevitable resistance of silence. Less happily, the police stepped up their activity against homosexuality, leading to a series of headline court cases which brought the issue to the public's attention. The 'quality' newspapers started to discuss the arguments for and against legalisation; the gutter-press featured lurid, self-righteous exposés of the gay underworld.[1]

This marks a vital change, for once a subject interests the general public and not just a handful of individuals it becomes the stuff of drama. The 'homosexual' had stepped out of the medical tomes onto the front pages of the newspapers. From there, it was a very short step to the stage.

American developments were repeated in Britain. The two decades after the end of the war saw a gradual liberalisation in sexual attitudes, culminating in the relaxation of laws relating to divorce, abortion and homosexuality. However, homosexual reform had to await the results of a Committee of Enquiry set up to report back to Parliament, the Wolfenden Committee, which convened in 1954. Three years later, it recommended the legalisation of homosexual acts between consenting male adults. Emboldened by this development, the Homosexual Law Reform Society was formed in 1958; two lesbian groups, Kenric and The Minorities Research Group, followed in the early sixties. The campaign to change the law grew, but it still took immense effort by many dedicated people[2] to push through the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 which decriminalised male

homosexuality in England and Wales.[3]

Unfortunately, the less pleasant aspects of American society were repeated here. Police action against male homosexuality became more frequent following a directive from the Home Office in October 1953 to institute 'a new drive against male vice'. Magistrates were advised to hand out stiffer sentences. This led to a series of headline trials - Croft-Cooke, Montagu, Pitt Rivers, Wildeblood[4] - and criticism of the police for the tactics they used to obtain evidence and convictions. The association made on the other side of the Atlantic between communism and homosexuality was fuelled here by Burgess' defection to the U.S.S.R. in March 1951, and later by Vassall's arrest and trial for spying in 1962.

Another important influence was the Kinsey Report, a statistical survey published in 1948 which surprisingly evolved into an international best-seller. Public opinion had tended to think of homosexuality as a rare phenomenon, but Kinsey's figures made it clear that male homosexual behaviour was very common in the Western world. These various influences working together - the homophile organisations, the headlines following tough police action, Kinsey's statistics - made homosexuality increasingly visible in post-war British society.

One result of this visibility was the evolution of homosexual stereotypes. Once society could no longer credibly deny the homosexuality in its midst, 'homosexuals' began to be distinguished from the rest of humanity by the attribution of fixed traits and mannerisms. The cost of a public identity was a rigid stereotype, both for lesbians and for gay men. Most people genuinely believed that all homosexuals conformed to a type; homosexual men were

effeminate, lesbians were aggressive. A 1963 issue of The Sunday Pictorial went as far as an article entitled How to Spot a Homo which confidently stated that homosexual men wore sports jackets and suede shoes and smoked a pipe.[5]

The dominant stereotypes were those of the screaming queen and the butch dyke, which both represented a sort of intermediate sex. The screaming queen was a flamboyant, effeminate man who affected female mannerisms and behaviour, sometimes to the extent of cross-dressing; the butch dyke was a man-hating, muscle-bound virago in a pin-striped suit and tie. These stereotypes had some basis in reality, since people who fitted them could certainly be found (although this begs the question whether some homosexual people behaved in this way because it was expected of them, or did so in order to give themselves a sense of collective identity). However, these subtleties are not relevant here, for we are discussing the simplistic belief that all homosexual people were naturally, biologically destined to inhabit this twilight zone between the sexes. Ulrich's third-sex hypothesis had given birth to a concrete image, a popular myth.

The stereotypes of screaming queen and butch dyke dominated ideas about homosexuality in the 1960s and found their way on to the stage. It may appear paradoxical that the period which passed long-awaited legal reforms also saw the most blatant, offensive stereotyping, but, just as increased police activity could be best explained as a panicky response to social change, the popularity of stereotypes marked the gradual integration of homosexuality into public thinking. At least the most insidious oppressor of all - silence - was being conquered.

The other manifestation of post-war sexual liberalisation of concern here is the relaxation of stage censorship. In Britain, this involved the abolition of the office of Lord Chamberlain, a post which had existed for hundreds of years.[6] Every play had to be granted a licence by this government official and work which did not have his seal of approval could only be performed in a private member's club.[7] Furthermore, improvisation was out of the question since its content could not be effectively controlled.

The abolition of the post of Lord Chamberlain left British theatre in a state of rude health. Many taboo subjects (including homosexuality) could be discussed openly on the stage for the first time in centuries. Theatre, which had been restricted to the banal and uncontroversial, leapt into the modern world in terms of both content and language.

Censorship can operate on either a covert or an explicit level. Every society considers certain subjects so taboo that they must never be raised. This form of covert censorship need not be forcibly imposed since it is tacitly accepted by everyone within the given society. The centuries of silence which stifled all mention of homosexuality represent censorship of this automatic, unconscious type.

The second form of censorship, measures taken against particular books and plays, only occurs once the other begins to break down. Individuals or organisations step out of line and officialdom must make an example of them. Yet this is often the first sign of a relaxation in attitudes, as was the case in British theatre after the 'angry young men' revolution of 1956. The new wave of playwrights wanted to deal with topics which the British stage was

not allowed to mention: abortion, homosexuality, politics, religion, promiscuity. These subjects were considered too sensitive for public discussion and were likely to warrant the Lord Chamberlain's blue pencil.

For all the difficulties that these young playwrights experienced, the abolition of the Lord Chamberlain's office seems somewhat inevitable in retrospect. The Lord Chamberlain had already relaxed his own standards in response to post-war social changes but this served only to weaken the dam still further. The clamour for the total abolition of stage censorship grew in volume throughout the 1960s. In 1968 the post of Lord Chamberlain, which had monitored British drama through the centuries, was finally laid to rest.

This had less immediate effect than either the supporters of reform or its opponents might have predicted. The Lord Chamberlain's seal of approval had at least been some sort of guarantee against being closed down by the police and theatre managements became even more cautious in the uncertain legal situation that followed the abolition of censorship. But the mood of the moment was liberal, and in a very short space of time a new freedom was changing the face of British theatre. Among the subjects which could be portrayed more explicitly than in the past was homosexuality.

The post-war period was one of gradual progress for homosexual reformers during which homosexuality emerged from the shadows into the full glare of the public spotlight. The first foot out of the closet was tentative and apologetic; the brave individuals who took this giant step stressed their respectability and their ordinariness. The general public, though, picked up their vision of homosexuality from the pages of the popular press and a series of stereotypes

became fixed in the public imagination. The drama of the period was dominated by these two factors - the call for liberalisation and the belief in a fixed homosexual type.

3. REDS INSIDE THE BED: AMERICA AFTER THE WAR

Two contrasting traditions can be traced through American social and political history. The first is the call for individual freedom which informs the Constitution, stressing the right of everyone to the pursuit of liberty and happiness. However, American society also nurtures a streak of religious fundamentalism, strongest in the Deep South, which spawns phenomena like the Ku Klux Klan and inspires the modern-day movement calling itself the Moral Majority.

These two extremes were both active in the immediate post-war years. The quest for individual freedom led to the birth of various civil rights movements, among which can be placed the early homophile organisations. The authoritarian reaction to this call for liberty was the hauling of individuals before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the hysteria of the McCarthy witch-hunts. A liberal request for greater tolerance of sexual minorities clashed with a fundamentalist paranoia which saw reds under the beds and faggots inside them. These conflicts stimulated three major plays of the period on the subject of homosexuality: Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (Tennessee Williams, 1955), A View From The Bridge (Arthur Miller, 1955) and Tea and Sympathy (Robert Anderson, 1953). All these texts portray a society which hates and fears homosexuality, but which can no longer dismiss it and pretend that it does not exist. Consequently, the plays mark an uneasy compromise; they are free to raise what was once a taboo subject but must do so in a hushed, elliptical manner.

Tennessee Williams is the most important playwright of the

period and the one who deals most openly with homosexual feelings. He touched on the subject as early as 1947 in A Streetcar Named Desire in a speech where Blanche recalls her husband's suicide. The cautious tone of the language is significant, for it reveals how careful Williams had to be in naming (or not naming) his topic:

> There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's, although he wasn't the least bit effeminate-looking - still - that thing was there.[1]

Softness and tenderness (characteristics which are traditionally assigned to women) are used to imply homosexuality in a man. In total contrast, the play's main male character, Stanley Kowalski, is a violent and aggressive individual capable of heterosexual rape. Two traditions of male homosexuality on the American stage are being realised during this scene : the association with 'feminine' behaviour and the championing of gentleness in contrast to conventional 'masculine' aggression.

Blanche goes on to describe how she discovered the truth about her husband:

> Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty - which wasn't empty, but had two people in it ...[2]

Shortly after this, her husband committed suicide. Blanche blames herself for failing to give him the support he needed, assuming that his homosexuality could have been changed if she had done more to help him acquire heterosexual habits. This tragic tale occupies a mere five minutes of A Streetcar Named Desire, but the issues it

raised were clearly of deep significance to Williams, since they eventually become the central theme of an entire play, Cat On A Hot Tin Roof. In this work, an altogether stronger character, Maggie, tries to make her husband face up to his sexual doubts and fears.

Cat On A Hot Tin Roof is built around the unspoken, unconscious feelings Brick holds for his best friend, Skipper. He not only conceals these feelings from other people, but also tries to hide them from himself. To think about homosexuality is painful; to mention it almost impossible. The second act of the play is a long conversation between Brick and Big Daddy in which the subject is slowly and painfully brought out into the open. Even this happens only after a prolonged bout of shadow-boxing and the semantic evasions to which both men resort echo Mrs Tilford's prevarications in The Children's Hour:

> BIG DADDY: But Gooper an' Mae suggested that there was something not right exactly in your -
> BRICK: 'Not right'.
> BIG DADDY: Not, well, exactly normal in your friendship with -
> BRICK: They suggested that too? [3]

When Big Daddy's pressure finally wears down Brick's resistance and they discuss homosexuality, Brick uses the negative words of his sporting peer-group: 'sissies', 'queers', 'fairies'.[4] He has internalised the sexual standards of male, heterosexual America:

> Big Daddy, you shock me, Big Daddy, you, you shock me! Talkin' so - (he turns away from his father) - casually! - about a thing like that ... Don't you know how people feel about things like that? How, how disgusted they are by things like that? [5]

Holding such a negative view of homosexuality, Brick is naturally

frightened to analyse his relationship with Skipper. When Big Daddy's persistence finally corners him, Brick calls it a 'pure and true thing'[6], vehemently denying that it had any sexual element. He suggests that Maggie is responsible for putting this 'dirty, false idea'[7] into Skipper's head, and he has either repressed, or chosen to forget, a phone-call in which Skipper 'made a drunken confession'[8] to him. Guilt and fear have frozen Brick's feelings, for Skipper had afterwards gone on to commit suicide.

Cat On A Hot Tin Roof reflects an America in which homophobia[9] is so intense that men crush all tender feelings towards other men, even to the extent that these feelings sink from ordinary consciousness. The point of William's play is not that Brick is a latent homosexual, or a bi-sexual, but that he lives in a society where homophobia warps all friendship between two men, sexual or not. Twisted by his violent hatred of homosexuality, Brick has had to deny all his feelings for Skipper lest they turn out to be sexual. Cat On A Hot Tin Roof is not merely the tale of a repressed homosexual, but a study of the stunted relationships which exist between men in a homophobic society, an emotional barrenness reflected in Brick's relationship with his father.

Brick is running away from two painful emotions: guilt over Skipper's suicide and fear that he himself might be a 'sissy'. Since Brick is the type of man who hides his emotions from public view, audiences can never be certain about his feelings for Skipper. Is he repressing a sexual feeling of which he is dimly aware, or is he frightening himself with a phantom horror? The parallel with Hellman's play is striking, and, as with The Children's Hour, the uncertainty adds to the play's subtlety and makes it acceptable to a wide audience.

Cat On A Hot Tin Roof drags male homosexuality out of the shadows - indeed, its dramatic power stems from the tension created by raising a taboo subject - but one suspects that it was an experience as painful for many of the audience as for the characters on stage.

Therefore, once the terrible subject of homosexuality has been dragged to the surface, the play loses much of its momentum. It is as if Williams is uncertain what to say next; the catharsis of the Second Act has no definite consequences and all mention of homosexuality is quickly dropped. Audiences are left to guess what revelations Brick has reached about himself and how much of a change has taken place inside him as a result of his conversation with Big Daddy. Furthermore, Maggie tells Big Daddy that she is pregnant and promises Brick that they are 'going to make the lie true'.[10] The heterosexual norm has been threatened but is rapidly reaffirmed: Brick has evaded a deep and honest self-analysis and the play has dodged many of the issues it raises.

Clearly, Williams felt he had gone as far as he could in 1955. Had he gone further, and spoken too positively about homosexual feelings, his play might have failed as a piece of theatre, or never even have got as far as the stage. It is probably also true that the play mirrored many of Williams' own internal conflicts about his homosexuality. Maggie's attempts to lure Brick back to the heterosexual fold may make for a conciliatory and unconvincing ending, but it is still far from being a glib conclusion. It should rather be interpreted as a vacuum which later writers will try to fill.

Cat On A Hot Tin Roof can still provide a rivetting night's theatre. Loathing of homosexuality is not yet a thing of the past,

particularly within the type of all-male, sporting environment to which Brick belongs. Self-evasion is still a common survival technique for people troubled by intimations of homosexual feelings. The silence and ignorance surrounding homosexuality may have lessened, but it is far from completely dispersed. Cat On A Hot Tin Roof is a text of rare quality which must figure on any list of 'gay classics', both for its pioneering courage and for its dramatic excellence.

The same cannot be said for a play Williams wrote a few years later, the crude and sensationalistic Suddenly Last Summer. This is the story of Sebastian, a middle-aged poet, who is finally torn apart and eaten by a gang of pauper children. A sensitive, artistic man, pampered by his doting mother, he uses his female cousin to attract boys to his private beach and then pays them for sexual services. The text builds up to its climax of cannibalism, a paroxysm of violence which Williams presumably intended to be a modern parallel to Greek tragedy. As in Ancient Athens, none of the violent action occurs on stage; it is related by Catherine as she abreacts under the influence of a truth drug and her repressed memories surge back into consciousness.

The lurid content of Suddenly Last Summer had an immediate power to shock, but its excesses pandered to popular misconceptions about male homosexuality. Cat On A Hot Tin Roof challenged audiences because Brick did not fit a homosexual stereotype; he came closer to a type (the hard-drinking, all-American sportsman) that people viewed as the very antithesis of the male homosexual. Sebastian, on the other hand, has all the hallmarks of a freak. He is spoilt and rich; he does not work; he seems to have no

friends other than the doting Catherine; he is terrified of growing old. His sexual preference for youngsters is the final brushstroke in the homosexual caricature.

By placing homosexuality alongside madness and cannibalism, Williams makes it part of a freak show. His play is riddled with bogus psychiatry, a crude, Hollywood Freudianism divorced from everyday life. Homosexuality is not depicted as a common-place form of behaviour, but as a strange sexual thrill indulged in by rich, jaded poets. The subtlety of Cat On A Hot Tin Roof makes the play a challenging piece of work, even allowing for its compromises; Suddenly Last Summer is both more daring and, paradoxically, more safe. The former finishes on a question-mark and leaves the audience feeling uncomfortable, as if something is still unresolved; the melodramatic finale of the latter smacks of moral retribution, the homosexual character being punished for his sins.

In his early plays, Tennessee Williams displays increasing confidence with regard to homosexuality. The subject inspires a delicately-worded speech in A Streetcar Named Desire, develops into the elusive central theme of Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, but is mentioned quite explicitly by the time of Suddenly Last Summer.

What distinguished Williams from contemporaneous playwrights who were brave enough to mention homosexuality was his subjectivity. Arthur Miller and others treated the subject sympathetically, but with an objective eye. In contrast, Williams created two central characters - Brick and Sebastian - who were forged from within. In both cases, he felt it necessary to stand back from these

creations, so that they never describe their personal emotions. Brick is the type of man who is divorced from his inner feelings and therefore incapable of expressing them. Sebastian never appears on stage, so that we only know him through the eyes of his cousin. But even allowing for this safety-valve, the plays have a poetic, subjective truth lacking in other texts of the period; one feels that the act of writing these plays placed Williams on the knife-edge of his own conflicts and self-disgust. Williams is not the first modern author to mention homosexuality; it could be argued, though, that he deserves the mantle of first homosexual playwright.

Homosexuality is more tangential to Arthur Miller's play, A View From The Bridge. Williams presents homophobia from the point of view of the victim; Cat On A Hot Tin Roof is a study of someone tormented by an inner conflict between his love for his friend and his hatred of homosexuality. A View From The Bridge concentrates instead on the person who accepts and generates society's hatred of homosexuals, for its central character is Eddie, a working-class American who has all the customary prejudices of someone from his background.

Eddie feels threatened when his niece falls in love with an illegal Italian immigrant, Rodolpho. The differences between Italian and American culture are too great for Eddie to come to terms with, so he simply cannot understand a man who cooks, dances, sings and sews. These are feminine accomplishments and any man who displays them is suspect. Eddie clearly feels that Rodolpho must be homosexual, but cannot bring himself to mention the subject;

therefore, he edges around the subject by euphemistic language very similar to that of Cat On A Hot Tin Roof:

> EDDIE: (takes a breath) The guy aint right, Mr Alfieri.
> ALFIERI: What do you mean?
> EDDIE: I mean he aint right.[11]

When asked to explain what he means, Eddie can only express his bemusement through concrete examples: Rodolpho 'aint right' because he has platinum hair, sings high notes and can make dresses.

It is extremely unlikely that Eddie is consciously aware of any sexual feelings towards his teenaged niece, but sexual jealousy underlies his antagonistic response to Rodolpho: 'When I think of that guy layin' his hands on her'.[12] Eddie displays a mixture of hostility, envy and fear towards the young Italian and considerable confusion in his attitude to homosexuality. He suspects that Rodolpho is homosexual and yet believes that the young man is making love to his niece. Eddie's emotions are so powerful and contradictory that he represses them from consciousness, but they re-emerge as aggression directed towards Rodolpho, the object of his envy. He rationalises this hatred as an attempt to protect his niece from an unhappy marriage; nevertheless, he can barely conceal the sexual jealousy that is the true source of his feelings. And ultimately it is not the idea of sexual contact between two men that really threatens Eddie - it is doubtful if he has enough imagination to envisage this - but Rodolpho's apparent rejection of the traditional male role.

Homosexuality is not a particularly important aspect of A View

From The Bridge; it is an imaginary danger existing only in Eddie's mind. Miller is careful to insert a scene where Rodolpho and Catherine come out of the bedroom together, stressing the fact that Rodolpho is heterosexually inclined. Even the kiss that Eddie gives Rodolpho at one point in the play should not be interpreted as a sign of repressed homo-eroticism, but as an act of male aggression. Subconsciously, Eddie is trying to establish his dominance over a male rival by an action which relegates Rodolpho to the passive, 'female' position.

- A View From The Bridge reflects the America of the Cold War, a country where the foreign and the unusual are viewed as menacing. It portrays this national paranoia not on a grand scale, by examining its effect on foreign policy or internal politics, but at the grass roots. The hounds of McCarthyism were unleashed because of the fears of millions of Americans like Eddie, people who could not come to terms with the changes taking place in the world. The real conflict explored in this play was that between two different cultures (American and Italian) and two different generations. Minorities had to bear the brunt of the social conflict that simmered in the melting-pot of post-war America, and communists and homosexuals became the devils of the period. A View From The Bridge shows the projected hostility that led to the persecution of these scapegoats, but the homosexuality it raises is imagined, not real.

Robert Anderson's Tea and Sympathy also revolves around an allegation of homosexuality which turns out to be untrue. As in A View From The Bridge, the real subject of the drama is not

homosexuality, but the fear which lies beneath the surface of male bravado which leads to the persecution of those who do not conform to accepted male standards.

The play is set in a boys' boarding school shaken by the scandal of a master and a boy found sunbathing naked together. The master is instantly dismissed and the boy is persecuted by pupils and teachers alike. He is taunted and ostracised, becoming so confused and unhappy that he attempts suicide.

The boy, Tom, lodges in the house of one of the teachers and his wife. He has never been particularly popular with the teacher (Bill) because he does not conform to the hearty, masculine standards of the school. Bill describes Tom by the dismissive label of 'off-horse'[13], someone who does not fit in as part of the team. Tom wears his hair long instead of sporting the usual crew-cut, he always takes part in the school play, spends his leisure time strumming a guitar and is poor at team sports (although school champion at tennis).

The marriage between Bill and Laura is an unhappy one. Bill much prefers to spend his time with the boys, playing sports or climbing mountains, and an outward show of affection is all that remains of their love. Laura feels desperately lonely in the all-male environment of the boys' school, and feels naturally attracted towards Tom, sensing that he, too, feels isolated in these surroundings. She realises that Tom has a crush on her and that, unlike most of the other boys in the school, he needs to feel affection for any person with whom he makes love. By the end of the play, Laura has concluded that her marriage is an empty shell and has decided to leave her husband. Tom's only sexual experience

to date has been a disastrous episode with a local girl which failed because neither of them felt any affection for the other, but this has made him doubt his own virility and heterosexuality. The final scene shows Laura going into Tom's room, and 'with a slight and delicate movement, she unbuttons the top button of her blouse, and moves towards Tom'.[14] Clearly, she is about to prove to Tom that his fears are groundless and that he is heterosexual.

Tea and Sympathy is open in its treatment of homosexuality and does not use evasive language; the most common word employed is the boys' derogatory 'fairy'. But since it is always made clear that Tom is not homosexual, the play never really has to take an attitude towards homosexuality; Tom warrants sympathy because he is an unjustly persecuted heterosexual boy. Once again, Tea and Sympathy is a play about society's homophobia rather than about homosexuality itself. . . .

The three plays studied in this chapter , Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, A View From the Bridge and Tea and Sympathy, depict a world in which the male is trapped by rigid gender expectations. These are most acute in Tea and Sympathy which is set in the claustrophobic surroundings of a boys' boarding school. Here boys learn to grow up to be 'normal' men in a world where manliness consists of a superficial show of courage and strength which masks moral and emotional cowardice. Society in general, and all-male settings in particular, demand complete conformity from their members. Anyone who is not good at team sports and does not brag about his sexual conquests is liable to have the finger of suspicion pointed at him. Boys soon discover the kind of behaviour which is expected of them

and learn to act in a suitably aggressive and insensitive manner.

Laura has already witnessed one human being destroyed by these standards. Her first marriage had been to a young boy, similar in temperament to Tom, who was killed while training with the Army:

> He was killed being conspicuously brave. He had to be conspicuously brave, you see, because of something that had happened in training camp - I don't know what - and he was afraid the others thought him a coward. He showed them he wasn't.[15]

She now has few illusions about glory and honour: 'in trying to prove he was a man, he died a boy.'.[16]

The homophobia which prompted her first husband to make a suicidal show of bravery is now destroying her second husband. Bill is dying inside; proving himself a 'real man' has involved denying aspects of his personality which are essential to being human. The stage directions suggest that Bill was once a sensitive adolescent, not unlike Tom: 'He stands in the door and listens, remembering his miserable boyhood.'.[17] Indeed, Laura fell in love with Bill because of a vulnerability that she glimpsed when they first met, but has slowly become lost under an 'outward show of manliness'.[18]

In the process of becoming a man in American society, a boy learns to impose an emotional restriction on himself, distorting and shrinking his capacity for feeling until he loses contact with the sensitive part of his nature. Ultimately he has no inner life at all; the perfect man is merely the perfect shell, completely out of touch with his feelings. This has happened to Bill, who has changed from a healthy, sensitive adolescent into an emotional cripple incapable of discussing (or even feeling) his deepest

emotions. He has become a real man at the expense of becoming an unreal person. But, as Laura says:

> Manliness is not all swagger and swearing and mountain climbing. Manliness is also tenderness, gentleness, consideration.[19]

Tea and Sympathy is advocating a new definition of manliness to replace the traditional, flawed, reductive one.

If society's image of manliness can only be attained at such high personal cost, there must be strong forces at work to keep it operating, and one of the most important of these is certainly a fear of homosexuality. Laura's first husband died trying to clear himself of an accusation of homosexuality; the schoolboys make an elaborate show of proving their heterosexuality by tales of sexual conquest; Tom's father is happy when he thinks his son has been expelled for being found in a girl's room, since this means he is not homosexual. In a modern society built on Christian foundations, homosexuality is loathed and feared, particularly by men who belong to all-male establishments like schools and prisons. The irony of these environments which exclude women is that they stimulate the homosexual feelings that are so despised. Yet men who can only relate to other men might well be called homosexual, even if their preference for their own sex never becomes overtly sexual.

The events of the play, and in particular her husband's exaggerated response to them, convince Laura that Bill is repressing a homosexual aspect of his own personality. He does not feel easy with women, or trust them, or even like them very much, and Laura starts to analyse what has gone wrong with their marriage:

> You never wanted to marry really. - Did they kid you into it? Does a would-be headmaster have to be married? Or what was it, Bill? - You would have been far happier going off on your jaunts with the boys, having them to your rooms for feeds and bull-sessions[20]

Until then, she has blamed herself for their disappointing sex life, but she begins to realise that Bill is the one who has put up the barriers. She finally risks speaking her thoughts aloud, although she can only do so 'quietly, almost afraid to say it':[21]

> Did it ever occur to you that you persecute in Tom, that boy up there, you persecute in him the thing you fear in yourself?[22]

One can assume that Bill has never taken part in homosexual sex, and yet Laura 'has hit close to the truth he has never let himself be conscious of'.[23] The boys and male teachers persecute Tom because they are punishing a part of themselves which they profoundly fear. The message of Tea and Sympathy is that Tom is 'more of a man'[24] than Bill because he can admit to the feminine side of his nature. Gentle, sensitive men are victimised by other men because they reject the restrictive role that society imposes on them. Yet, in truth, it is they who are braver, rounder, richer human beings; in contrast, their persecutors are prisoners of a self-imposed jail from which they can never escape.

Several American plays of the 1950s touch on homosexuality. but they all take a reticent approach to the subject. The only character who is unequivocally homosexual in the plays studied here is Sebastian in Suddenly Last Summer, written late in the decade.

The other plays hedge their bets: Brick may or may not be homosexual, and at the end of the play Maggie plans to lure him back to heterosexuality; Rodolpho is clearly not homosexual, since we see him come out of the bedroom with Catherine; Tom is a sexual innocent about to be initiated into the joys of heterosexual passion by an older woman.

Another interesting similarity between the plays is the association of homosexuality with death, and particularly suicide. Sebastian dies an especially horrible death; Skipper drinks himself to destruction; Blanche's first husband blows his brains out; Laura's first husband is killed in a foolhardy act of bravery. Tom and Brick survive the final curtain, but it is interesting that these are the two characters who end their plays in the arms of a woman. The final solution, it seems, had to be either heterosexuality or death. Homosexual desire could not be raised without an accompanying suggestion of moral retribution; the wages of un-natural sin was un-natural death.

This was also true of The Children's Hour, a play which was revived in the early 1950s and probably had some influence on the plays studied in this chapter. In tone, mood and treatment of subject-matter, The Children's Hour leapt forward two decades and fitted easily into the drama of this period. Its outlook was liberal, but it made identical compromises: Martha's sexual feelings are drawn in shadowy uncertainty and she, too, eventually commits suicide.

None of these plays went as far as advocating tolerance of homosexuality. Intolerance was implicitly criticised, whether the small-town self-righteousness of The Children's Hour or the working-

class bigotry of A View From The Bridge, but this was still a long way from a positive acceptance of sexual variety. The American dramatists of the fifties reflected the Cold War and wrote tentative plays on controversial subjects, plays which might have earned the wrath of authority at any time. They could not be expected to leap out of their age, putting forward arguments that placed them in danger, nor could they completely escape the attitudes of their day. If the furtive, evasive tone of their plays speaks of shame, it is because homosexuals were ashamed of their sexuality at this time.

Playwrights were cautious, and yet public opinion in America seemed ready for this development, at least if the critics' reviews of the time faithfully reflected current attitudes. As with The Captive, the dramatic qualities of all three plays - Tea and Sympathy, Cat On A Hot Tin Roof and A View From The Bridge - ... were recognised and lavishly praised. However, reviewers no longer skirted around the subject-matter of the plays or traded in polite euphemisms. 'One of the lads ... has been suspected of homosexuality'[25] is part of one reviewer's matter-of-fact summary of the plot of Tea and Sympathy. Even more blunt is John Chapman's description of Cat On A Hot Tin Roof in The Daily News: 'This man also has two sons. One is stuffy and upright and the other is a drunkard and queer.'.[26] The words may not show sensitivity or support, but they certainly indicate a relaxation in how candidly one could raise the subject of homosexuality.

Nor does anyone express the sentiment that the subject-matter of these plays is not a suitable one for drama (as had been the case with The Captive). Many of the reviewers were upset by what

they considered to be un-necessary bad language, as in this critique of Cat On A Hot Tin Roof: 'We know a spade is a spade, but it doesn't have to be a dirty, fetid, miserable, filthy garden implement.'.[27] A few also went on to express their distaste for the realism with which topics were portrayed. In the same review of Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, John McClain frowned:

> And there is the implication, at least, that the most motivation in the play derives from an unnatural relationship. This may be life, to be sure, but how stark and unremitting can you get?[28]

But no reviewer suggested that merely raising the topic of homosexuality constituted a threat to public morality. Liberal opinion, at least, was now ready for serious plays on this controversial subject.

That was America. Britain lagged far behind, and all three major plays were banned here by the Lord Chamberlain, despite their artistic reputation, and could only be performed in private members' clubs. For all its Cold War paranoia, America still allowed a measure of liberty that did not exist at the time on this side of the Atlantic.

A theme common to Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, A View From The Bridge and Tea and Sympathy is the question of 'manliness'. All three plays contain characters who are ordinary American men - Brick, Eddie, Bill - and in each case they are found wanting. Beneath a veneer of bravado, they all suffer from an emotional constriction which renders them incapable of softness, tenderness and affection. They cannot communicate their inner feelings, and

fear and mistrust their gentler emotions. Brick finds it almost impossible to discuss his feelings with Big Daddy; Bill is frightened to explore the emotional problems of his marriage; Eddie is so out of touch with his emotions that he projects them on to other people and does not even realise what he is doing.

The male gender-role is criticised in all three plays for being un-necessarily stiff and restrictive. This theme will be taken up from a more confident, politicised viewpoint by later writers, who will draw the male homosexual in a positive light because his sexual practices place him outside the traditional male role. Playwrights of the 1950s were working from a less theoretical base: the homosexual was seen as an unfortunate victim of society's harsh vision of masculinity, not as the vanguard of desirable changes in the male role. Gentleness in men was advocated and praised, but homosexual behaviour in itself was hardly commented on.

On one level, the American plays of the fifties did little more than wiggle a toe out of the closet door and rapidly retract it. However, even this timorous movement marked a vital development, for once it was made there was no going back. Homosexuality had become a fit subject for the stage.

4. BRITAIN IN THE FIFTIES

Given the British reputation for reticence, one might expect British drama of the 1950s to be less explicit about homosexuality than its American counterpart. Gay history certainly suggests that homosexual rights groups were more vocal in the United States. Yet the subject of homosexuality was also debated publicly in Britain, particularly after the Wolfenden Committee was set up to examine possible changes in the law.

There were certainly British plays willing to touch on the subject.[1] Joan Henry's Look on Tempests was the story of a woman whose husband stood accused of un-natural relations with an Italian youth. Travers Otway's The Hidden Years and Roger Gellert's Quaint Honour were set in boarding schools, both depicting the transitory homosexual crushes which blossom in those emotional hothouses. The equally claustrophobic setting of prison formed the environment for W.D. Home's Now Barabbas. Peter Shaffer drew one of the earliest examples of the screaming queen stereotype in Five Finger Exercise, and Henry Reed translated a French play on the subject, La Ville dont le Prince est un Enfant, into English. Also, the American drama of the period soon reached these shores, propelled by the literary reputation of authors like Williams and Miller (even if the Lord Chamberlain forced these scripts into private member theatre clubs).

There was no lack of plays broaching the subject of homosexuality, but most of them used the same evasions and compromises as their American equivalents. In Look on Tempests, the accusation of un-natural relations turned out to be false. Plays set in boarding schools and

prisons effectively negated their homosexual element by intimating that homosexuality was a product of an un-naturally restricted life-style or an adolescent phase which faded with age. As in the States, the theatregoing public seemed to need to water down the subject in order to make it palatable.

The two plays now studied in greater detail - Julien Green's South and Philip King's Serious Charge, both staged in 1955 - draw the parameters for what was possible on the British stage at this time. The former is a play of considerable psychological insight, showing how an artist can sometimes create subtle, intelligent art within the restrictions imposed by strict censorship. The latter is a simplistic tale of false accusation, never transcends the limitations of its age, and has little of relevance to say about homosexuality.

For all Green's subtlety of approach when writing South, the Lord Chamberlain still refused to grant the play a performing license. Its British performance therefore had to take place in the Arts Theatre Club rather than in a public theatre. It was directed by a young Peter Hall, who stated that South was 'not primarily about homosexuality: this topic is only a thread in Green's tapestry'.[2]

Such may be the case, but it is certainly the most important thread, or, to be more precise, the central point from which the play's various threads radiate outwards. Green chose to preface his play with a quote from Aristotle's Poetics: 'The purification of a dangerous passion by a violent liberation'.[3] He clearly intended the homosexual desire which flames up as soon as Lieutenant Wicziewsky and Eric Mac Clure meet each other to be the 'dangerous passion'[4]

which underlies the tragic events of his story.

The plot of South is a Chekhovian tangle of unrequited love where each character nurtures a futile passion for another, and these passions are fanned by the isolation of the play's deep South setting. Both major female characters declare themselves in love: Regina struggling with her overpowering desire for Lieutenant Wicziewsky, Angelina relishing her infatuation with the handsome, young Eric Mac Clure. Regina, the more mature woman, knows only too well that her love is not reciprocated, and by the end of the play there is every indication that she has grown to realise why: 'It's neither with you, nor with me that he's in love',[5] she tells Angelina. Her love is devoid of self-delusion, for from the start she has sensed something different about Ian Wicziewsky; he may wear the uniform of an American soldier, but he will always 'remain a stranger'.[6]

Angelina's love for Mac Clure is much less profound. A young girl isolated on a Southern plantation, she falls in love with the first good-looking man whose arrival breaks the monotony of her daily routine. Mac Clure has encouraged her attentions, for he has managed to convince himself that he returns Angelina's love. They are two young people in the process of discovering their emotions, not yet experienced enough to separate their real feelings from the conventional ones expected of them.

The play's trail of unrequited desire causes pain and suffering, but far greater misery is unleashed by its one reciprocated feeling: Wicziewsky's desire for Mac Clure. The stage directions suggest an immediate physical attraction between the two men:

> Almost at the same time, [Wicziewsky] enters at right and stops short on seeing the stranger. The two men look at each other. Neither one moves.[7]

Furthermore, this action occurs at one of the most important points in the traditional, well-made, three-act play: before the curtain at the end of Act One. Green clearly wanted his audience to realise that something special had happened in that instant.

Lieutenant Wicziewsky is consciously aware of the feelings aroused in him: 'I'm not the same as I was, a little while ago. Since then, something happened.'.[8] In an attempt to run away from these feelings, he asks Broderick for Angelina's hand in marriage, but neither Angelina nor her father believe that Wicziewsky is really in love with her. In a scene reminiscent of Brick's conversation with Big Daddy, Broderick forces home the truth to Ian Wicziewsky:

> BRODERICK: Shall I tell you who you're in love with?
> IAN: (Turns away so that Edward Broderick can no longer see his face): No.[9]

'No one escapes his fate, Ian ... No one escapes that fate',[10] Broderick continues, explaining that he will not agree to the marriage because it would ruin two lives.

After this encounter, Ian Wicziewsky can no longer try to deny his real feelings. He tells Broderick's son, 'I'm in love, Jimmy, as no human being ever was before. Of course, all men say that, and each of them is right. I can't go on living any longer.'. He has decided his love can never be returned, and rather mysteriously says that he intends to 'hurl [himself] against [his] fate as you hurl yourself against a stone wall.'.[12] He then tells Jimmy a story from his Polish homeland about a young man in a similar situation who had 'fallen into a frenzy and killed his love',[13] and we fear his passion may drive him as far as murder.

Mac Clure has less experience of life and does not seem able

to make sense of his feelings for Wicziewsky. He is too naive to conceal his emotions and makes what is virtually a declaration of love without recognising it for what it is:

> (He goes up to Ian and takes his hand.) Lieutenant Veechefsky, something attracts me to you that I can scarcely explain, for to tell the truth, I hardly know you. I remember that five years ago, when I was still at school, I was seized with a sudden affection for a classmate to whom I hadn't said twenty words perhaps in a whole term. We became inseparable and as we were both of us deeply religious, we exchanged prayer books. All this seems a little ridiculous now, but we weren't over fifteen and as sincere as we could be. Since then he married a girl I was in love with, but I never bore my rival a grudge. I don't know why, you remind me of him ... I believe that under more favourable circumstances, we might have been friends, you and I, and remained friends for many years. Don't you think so? Why don't you say something? (He lets go Ian's hand)[14]

Immediately afterwards, though, he withdraws, as if realising that he has gone too far, and announces that he is in love with Angelina. He tells Wicziewsky of his love, but his words are empty and conventional and lack the fire of real passion. Wicziewsky points out that if Mac Clure were truly suffering such deep agonies of love he would be sitting beside Angelina, breathing forlorn sighs, rather than talking to him:

> What are you doing here, alone in this room with me, talking of love? (He seizes his arm and pushes him in front of the mirror) Look at yourself! It's you that are enclosed in a ban, in a circle of horror. It surrounds your face, your shoulders, your hands. Look at that brow, innocent of all desire, those lips that no lips have ever touched because you're afraid and spread that fear around you.[15]

This cauldron of passions finally gets upturned when Wicziewsky calls Mac Clure a coward and strikes him in the face. Both men work themselves up into a frenzy of rage and agree to fight a duel.

The people on the plantation assume that the two men are fighting over Angelina, but they are actually expressing through aggression the emotions which they dare not express through tenderness. Unable to love each other, they need to achieve a 'purification of a dangerous passion by a violent liberation'.[16]

The duel, which results in Wicziewsky's death, takes place off-stage, but the audience learns some interesting facts about the tragedy. Firstly, Wicziewsky made little effort to defend himself: 'He didn't even try to ward off the last blow'[17], Mac Clure reports in astonishment. Unable to consummate his love, perhaps threatened by the chance of consummation which Mac Clure has innocently offered, Wicziewsky chose to die instead. Mac Clure's reaction had been the exact opposite, for he set about Wicziewsky with a ferocity that shocked one of the on-lookers: 'Mac Clure was terrible ... He struck and struck, again and again. He was like the destroying angel.'.[18] Only half-conscious of his sexual desire for Wicziewsky, Mac Clure had tried to destroy the feeling by destroying the person who aroused it.

South is a complex, intense piece of writing, far superior to other plays about homosexuality on the British stage during the same period. It eschews stereotyping and avoids cliché. At a time when homosexuality was considered so shocking that it tended to dominate any play in which it appeared, South achieved a rare textural richness, the homosexual theme being only one among many. The background of the American Civil War, the first shots of which are fired in the final scene, connects the events on the plantation with the political realities of the world outside. There is no statement explicitly linking repressed homo-eroticism and male aggression (and therefore

war) but the implication is clearly there, even if the argument is never fully rationalised.

But perhaps romanticism is South's most striking feature. Plays on the subject of homosexuality have generally tended to avoid the sexual element altogether, or to go to the other extreme and treat homosexuality as a purely sexual phenomenon, without any emotional dimension. Thus, plays like Tea and Sympathy and The Children's Hour revolved around a false accusation of homosexuality, while some recent work has tried to focus on male sexuality in isolation, without any emotional component. In general, there has been little room in gay drama for romantic love.

However, this is the emotion at the heart of South; the play is unashamedly romantic. The love which Wicziewsky feels for Mac Clure, the mixture of desire, need, attraction and vulnerability, is treated quite seriously, without the slightest trace of cynicism. Perhaps this reflects the play's French origins; most definitely, emotions of this intensity were rare in the stiff-upper-lip drama of post-war British theatre. South assumes that homosexual love involves the same emotions as heterosexual love, and thus achieves an uncommon moral neutrality. Interestingly, the other early play to display the same non-judgmental attitude had also been French, The Captive. Most other homosexual drama worked from the opposite premise: that homosexuality was a bizarre phenomenon divorced from normal behaviour.

South is a rich and sophisticated piece of writing but still bears many hallmarks of homosexual drama in the 1950s. The homosexual character dies dramatically, in un-natural circumstances; homosexuality is treated as an inevitable condition which brings great unhappiness; no word for 'homosexual' is ever used, and the topic is conveyed

through broad hints rather than made explicit; Biblical imagery is employed, defining homosexuality as a trial imposed by God. Even so, South failed to satisfy the Lord Chamberlain's stringent requirements, presumably because it did not condemn homosexuality with the vehemence expected at the time. Unfortunately, intelligence was not yet a virtue in a play bearing a homosexual theme.

The vagaries of censorship have often led to good drama being banned while inferior work gets performed with impunity. Unlike South, Philip King's Serious Charge did not earn the Lord Chamberlain's displeasure, even though its subject-matter was, if anything, more controversial, for the script described the story of a vicar who is accused of making sexual advances towards a boy of seventeen.

The plot is reminiscent of Hellman's The Children's Hour, which was finally granted a performing license in Britain during the early 1950s. A new vicar in a small village excites the enmity of one of the teenage lads there because he has thrown him out of the choir after catching him stealing and overhearing him 'pouring absolute filth into the ears of two of the youngest lads in the choir'.[19] When the vicar invites the boy (Larry) to his house to chide him for getting a young girl pregnant, the teenager starts the rumour that the vicar had 'tried to interfere with him'.[20] As in Hellman's play, an 'innocent' adolescent wreaks havoc by making a false accusation of homosexuality.

However, all resemblance ends there. Whereas Hellman's play goes on to explore the contradictory feelings stirred up inside one of the characters, Serious Charge never rises above the level of a melodrama in which a kind-hearted vicar is victimised by the machinations of a hard-headed young man. The characterisation is one-dimensional; consequently, the subject of homosexuality is never

plumbed to any depth. On the contrary, it acts as little more than a plot device which pushes the action forwards.

At the time, though, the mere mention of homosexuality was enough to render a play controversial. King's drama seems daring, until closer examination reveals that any trace of real homosexuality is carefully removed. The audience sees the scene in which Howard Phillips is supposed to have made a pass at the boy and therefore knows for a fact that the accusation is false. This is one play which really could claim to be about nothing more than a lie.

However, Serious Charge offers an interesting glimpse into attitudes of the time. The villagers begin a campaign of terror against the vicar, throwing chunks of turf at his car, sending anonymous poison-pen letters and hurling bricks through his window. Fathers take their boys out of the church choir and the parents of Howard's maid order her to pack up her things and leave the rectory. Suspicion is cast on the vicar as a bachelor at thirty, and even because he has decorated the rectory himself with fine taste. "One usually thinks of artistic men as being rather ... well you know what I mean'[21] one character stutters, and another points out to Howard, with meaning, 'And you're a bachelor ... with an artistic flair'.[22] The vicar himself uses the word 'pervert'[23] to describe the person he is accused of being. One might have hoped that this rather progressive parson take a more sympathetic line on the issue, but even he seems to condemn an entire group of people without the slightest qualm.

Not much can be said in favour of Serious Charge other than it raised homosexuality at a time when this was extremely rare. The play did not ask its audience to examine its attitudes to the subject; I would argue that it offered them every opportunity to avoid doing so.

Homosexuality seems to be the subject at the centre of the play, but the issue evaporates as soon as it appears. This brief mirage may have been enough to shock conventional theatregoers, but Serious Charge offered little food for thought for those with a more enquiring mind.

The bulk of new British theatre in the 1950s happened on the West End stage and generally sought to entertain a middle-class market. Look Back in Anger did not shake the theatrical establishment until 1956, the boom in local repertory theatre had to wait until the end of the decade, and fringe theatre was much less extensive than at the moment. The censor's heavy presence weighed down both dramatist and producer, so that challenging work on controversial themes could only reach the public through private theatre clubs. These factors militated against a serious drama dealing openly with several issues, including that of homosexuality.

An alternative to the middle-class theatrical establishment existed, though, in the form of the Unity theatres. These were regional groups aiming to create drama for the working classes, touring to halls, factories and local theatres. Sometimes paternalistic in their efforts to bring culture to the masses. Unity were nevertheless the first group to actively sponsor original work by working-class authors. Socialist and didactic, their work was consciously conceived as a political weapon in the class struggle. Since Unity's theatre had a more serious purpose than most West End entertainment, there was a greater readiness to raise controversial topics without the polite circumlocutions of middle-class drama. As early as 1948, the Glasgow group performed a play with a central character who was homosexual: Benedick Scott's The Lambs of God.

Scott's play is set in a small, Scottish industrial town during the depression of the 1930s. It follows the daily lives of the inhabitants of the Vennel, one of the most run-down streets in a run-down area crushed by the burden of mass unemployment. The Vennel is dominated by a brood of gossips who spend their time fishing for a tasty piece of tittle-tattle. Envy makes them quick to criticise anyone lucky enough to have a job and they show a viperish delight in their moral condemnation of local people whose reputations have become tarnished.

The plot is extremely complicated and somewhat lurid. A young man of twenty, Jimmie, returns to the Vennel with his sister; both had fled the area three years earlier when the local gossips found out that she was pregnant (while unmarried). Jimmie soon starts dating a local girl, Molly, and makes friends with Dick, the play's homosexual character. Dick makes a pass at Jimmie (off-stage) which so horrifies the young man that he rushes into the arms of a street-walker named Kate. Kate has recently become pregnant and is looking for someone to pay for the upkeep of the child, so she convinces Jimmie that he must be the father. However, Dick knows that Kate has secretly been dating a married man for several months and that the child is almost certainly his. Dick bears Kate an implacable grudge because she once testified against him in court, swearing false evidence that saddled him with the maintenance of someone else's child. Kate blackmailed Dick into accepting this by threatening to reveal his homosexuality and the affair he was having with another young man. Dick convinces Jimmie that he is not the father of Kate's child and that the culprit is a married man who was also responsible for his sister's illegitimate baby. Meanwhile, Molly has become

pregnant after being raped by a young man who lodges in her parents' house. The play ends on a harmonious note when Dick promises to look after Molly, while Jimmie returns to Glasgow to find work and save up enough money to marry her.

It is easy to mock this tangled plot in an age when it could come from one of the glossier American soaps (provided, of course, that the characters were taken out of their poverty into a life of extravagant opulence). Change has occurred so quickly that it takes an effort of the imagination to go back forty years and comprehend the courage of both playwright and company. This kind of gritty portrayal of extra-marital affairs, homosexuality, teenage pregnancy, rape and casual sex was unprecedented in 1948. It was certainly not happening alongside the rounded vowels of mainstream British theatre.

The Lambs of God treats all of these taboo subjects, including homosexuality, in a realistic, matter-of-fact way, quite unlike the evasion and hysteria of middle-class drama. Furthermore, the play suggests that a good socialist does not stand in judgement on other people and that homosexuals should therefore be treated with tolerance.

The play's realism prevents the creation of any kind of homosexual stereotype. Dick is not strikingly different from the other young men in the Vennel, and the description used most frequently of him in the stage directions is 'smooth'. He is portrayed as hiding his homosexuality beneath a bland, polite, quiet exterior, which seems logical and truthful; homosexuals faced with imprisonment on account of their sexuality would surely hide their sexual orientation behind a shell of respectability, not advertise it by means of outrageous behaviour. Nor does The Lambs of God make the usual assumptions

about sexuality and class. There is no pandering (unlike in The Green Bay Tree) to the stereotype of the decadent, upper-class pervert who leads decent young men astray.

Neither does Scott descend to the cliché of the pathetic old queen. Dick is a sad figure in many ways, but he is hardly weak or ridiculous. Unlike most of the young men in the Vennel, he earns good wages. He has nurtured his hatred for Kate and rejoices when he is able to revenge himself on her. Socially, he is smooth and adept and experiences no difficulty in hiding his sexual behaviour from public glare. None of the Vennel's gossips, even with their nose for scandal, seem to have realised the truth about his sexual orientation.

However, there are moments when Dick's mask slips to reveal his inner feelings and the audience realises that his life is a lonely, unhappy one. This eloquent speech is the first intimation of the real person hiding under that polite facade:

> Folks o one's own. You take 'em for granted - when you have them ... They belong - and you belong - for keeps - you're close to them ... But me. Me! I can do without a' that. It passes by and leaves me unmoved. What am I losin? Dam all. Human companionship comes to me at street corners - or lounging across the bar at the White Horse. Once it moves on - I drift out o sight. And the bloody blindin loneliness o it![24]

Admittedly, Dick is playing on Harry's emotions at this point, since he hopes to persuade him to stay the night. But even if there is a slight exaggeration of expression, the feeling behind the speech rings true. And there can be no doubt about a stage direction at the end of the play, when Dick is watching his new-found friend, Jimmie, leave for Glasgow:

> DICK watches him go, his whole body sags dejectedly, as if all the bitter self-disgust and torment, all the tragic unhappiness and inherent loneliness of his inversion had of a sudden been thrust upwards by his overburdened conscience, and for one stark moment the mask falls.[25]

The Lambs of God marks the first attempt of a socialist theatre group to depict homosexual characters and the beginning of a long association between socialism and gay rights that later finds dramatic voice in Gay Sweatshop. Nowadays it seems self-evident that the British left should support gay rights, but in the late 1940s this was far from automatic. On the contrary, many socialists and communists adopted the Stalinist line that homosexuality was a bourgeois decadence, a symptom of the diseased state of capitalist society. Unity were a socialist group, but Scott's play actually owes as much to the Christian tradition of charity and tolerance as it does to socialist doctrine. This becomes clear in one of the play's final speeches, when a gossip steps out of character to deliver these words:

> If Life has scaled my heart, yet and a' it's taught me this much -- If we're a' God's children then He's very little to boast o' -- and even less to condemn. Life's no to be resisted - And there are some He sent out to tackle it in polished hides - and others i' fine drawn stuff that rips a' too soon i' the struggle. And whose fault is that? It's no aye the weak.[26]

Scott has not discarded the traditional view of 'inversion' as a sin or a moral failing. The invert cannot be blamed for his condition, a trial which has been given him by God, and the Christian attitude to adopt is one of kindness and tolerance. Scott never states whether homosexuals should fight their feelings or try to accept them, but he is adamant that others should not condemn. None

of the characters in The Lambs of God have any right to moralise. The street gossips are self-righteous busybodies who cause great suffering through their venomous chatter; the Vennel's gang of young, unemployed men are aggressive, self-centred and coarse; Kate ruthlessly cheats Jimmie in order to maintain her relationship with Alec; Alec is a selfish rake who has a history of dropping young girls once he has made them pregnant. Everyone falls from grace, Scott suggests, and a true Christian should be magnanimous and forgiving.

Glasgow Unity Players were committed to the expression of socialist ideals through their drama. For instance, The Lambs Of God contains a speech arguing the need to overthrow the ruling class so that working people no longer have to struggle in order to survive. Yet the play's two themes - economic exploitation and sexual prejudice - are never woven together. The connection between the personal and the political, later to become a central tenet of 'sexual politics', is never made; the two spheres are seen as completely separate. The fight against economic exploitation is a political struggle which can only be solved (in Unity's view) by creating a socialist state. In contrast, sexual behaviour is a personal matter between an individual and God, and other people should not stand in judgement. Twenty-five years later, gay theatre groups will try to analyse the relationship between economic and sexual oppression; in 1948, they were clearly seen as two discrete issues.

Scott could not escape the intellectual climate of his day and he also had to placate the authorities. He is careful never to use the word 'homosexual' and the only explicit word (inversion) comes in the stage directions. However, this may be more than the

result of simple caution. Homosexual people of the period often had no self-identity based on their sexuality; the concept of 'homosexual' or 'invert' was still largely the property of medical and intellectual élites. Working-class culture certainly had its own words for what has always been a common form of behaviour, but public opinion in general was still remarkably innocent of homosexuality.

For all Scott's caution, reviews were predictably hostile. The Times spoke darkly of 'boys in danger of a prowling pervert',[27] and The Manchester Guardian summed up the plot with the words 'A streetwalker and a pervert inflict extra misery on some of their fellow slum dwellers'.[28] At the end of the play, the actor playing Dick came to the front of the stage and announced that he was not homosexual, presumably to safeguard himself against arrest and to protect his future acting career.

For all this, The Lambs of God remains an astonishing piece of drama. Its working-class realism and use of dialect owe a lot to O'Casey (a playwright whom Unity had performed) but they still marked a radical departure from the plummy artificiality of the West End. It is in terms of subject-matter, though, that the play is most daring and original. Its Christian theology may be an echo of the past, but its overall approach is startlingly modern in tone.

This is encapsulated in the scene where Jimmie and Dick meet for the first time after Jimmie's return from Glasgow. The two young men hold a conversation simmering with innuendo and double entendre, and the stage directions spell it out explicitly: 'they grin at each other - or maybe make a pass at each other -

in obvious friendship'.[29] Jimmie is no innocent victim in this game of seduction, for he starts the ball rolling when he calls Dick 'handsome',[30] to which Dick responds, ambiguously, 'You've certainly blossomed out'.[31] Jimmie goes on to flirt openly with Dick, encouraging him with the freely-offered remark that 'Women play little part in [his] life'.[32]

Of course, the intention behind this may be to emphasise Jimmie's naivety, a trait he later displays in his relations with Kate. But whether or not Jimmie is fully aware of what he is doing (and the stage direction 'maybe make a pass at each other'[33] suggests that he is) the scene is more subtle than a blatant case of seducer and victim. Jimmie is a willing accomplice in his seduction, at least for the moment, and if he is horrified once Dick makes a pass at him, his horror is more credible for being tinged with an element of desire. He has been playing a game (perhaps not too seriously) and recoils once it threatens to get out of hand. This depiction of the curiosity and fluidity of young male sexuality seems quite realistic, as does the suppressed homo-eroticism. Unlike most modern drama, which has tended to treat homosexuality as a simple, clear-cut phenomenon, The Lambs Of God portrays homosexual desire as a complex emotion.

It is doubtful whether Scott's play could succeed on the stage today, other than as an interesting period piece. So much has changed that certain aspects of the play would ring false, particularly the innocence of homosexuality that all the characters display. Homosexuality is simply more public and more visible nowadays. Nevertheless, The Lambs of God deserves its proper place in gay theatre history. The liberalism of the 1960s, the

politicisation of the 1970s and the complex characterisation of the 1980s all exist in embryo in this 1948 play.

Homosexuality made its first important breakthrough on the British and American stage in the years following the Second World War, helped by some of the leading playwrights of the day. On both sides of the Atlantic, though, the subject needed to be raised cautiously and edged around by means of various compromises.

The British stage saw quite a few plays touching on the topic of homosexuality. Sadly, the more intelligently a play dealt with the subject, the less likely it seemed to reach a wide audience. South had to be performed behind the closed doors of a private club (and also had the misfortune to coincide with a national newspaper strike); The Lambs of God suffered from the critical neglect which greeted the whole of Unity's theatrical output. Significant success meant performance on the West End, but the work granted this accolade tended to be thin and simplistic and much less challenging.

But at least the door was ajar. As 'the homosexual' became a public figure, audiences began to get accustomed to the idea of homosexual characters. Playwrights would soon be able to dispense with the ruse of leaving their characters' sexuality uncertain and depict them openly as homosexual. In the following decade, a host of unambiguously homosexual characters appeared on the British stage. Every advance has its drawbacks, though, and a new form of compromise emerged: the belief that homosexuals were a uniform group sharing a set of clearly distinguishable features. The age of the crude theatrical homosexual stereotype was under way.

5. OUT OF THE CLOSET, INTO THE STRAITJACKET

After the Second World War, the subject of homosexuality was raised in several plays, but some unwritten rules needed to be obeyed. Homosexuality had to be simultaneously denied and implied, generally by means of a plot in which a character suspected of being homosexual is, in fact, heterosexual.

These compromises finally crumbled in the 1960s, when the stage first included characters who thought of themselves as homosexual. After the evasions of the previous decade, there was a sudden spate of drama dealing more openly than ever before with homosexuality. It was no longer necessary to shroud the subject in mystery, or be coy about a character's sexual orientation. This development occurred in both America and Britain, on the experimental fringe (The Madness Of Lady Bright at the Caffe Cino) and in the established theatre (Staircase at the RSC). A similar relaxation of standards revolutionised film.[1]

However, the new homosexual characters conformed to fixed stereotypes. The theatre, of course, tends to stereotyping and caricature. Unlike the novelist, who has time to create a complex characterisation, the dramatist often needs to signal immediate information about characters through external signs. And, as the word 'dramatic' suggests, unusual and flamboyant characters work well on stage. The screaming queen dripping with sequins is more stunning than a homosexual man who looks and talks like a bank clerk.

The stereotyping of homosexual characters, though, represented something more than standard dramatic typification. A widespread belief existed that homosexuals were a homogenous group sharing

predictable characteristics. Male homosexuals were effeminate, bitchy and self-pitying; lesbians were butch, aggressive and man-hating. The general public felt threatened by the homosexuality in the headlines and one way to assuage this fear was to slot homosexuals into a pigeon-hole, to treat them as an exotic species removed from ordinary humanity. People felt reassured by seeing characters on stage who fitted their preconceived view of lesbians and homosexual men.

The new drama, though, sprang from liberal intentions, and hoped to encourage tolerance of homosexuality and changes in the law. Dramatists were concerned to create sympathy for homosexual characters, and therefore reinforced another stereotyped idea: that all homosexuals had tragic lives. The stereotype of the sad, old queen emerged, a lonely figure doomed by Fate to a life of abject misery. From a modern viewpoint, this may sound completely negative, but the stereotype served a useful purpose in eliciting sympathy. A model of the homosexual as someone who took a positive attitude towards his or her sexuality and saw it as a choice rather than an affliction would have been counter-productive. Opponents of legal reform argued that homosexuals were proselytisers and that changes in the law would lead to more seduction of young people and a higher incidence of homosexuality.[2] The counter-argument had to be advanced that homosexuals were born rather than made and that homosexuality was a condition warranting medical attention rather than penal severity.

The homosexual characters of this period therefore became tragic victims, lacking the dignity of self-determination. There were no homosexual figures to admire, respect or emulate; all that was asked of the spectator was boundless sympathy. The characters floundered in a morass of self-pity, helpless to change their miserable lives. They were studied from a condescending height, as one might study a biological species, and a strictly deterministic model of sexuality

is advanced.

This determinism had developed into something far more subtle than concepts of female brains in male bodies. Biology had failed to produce a single piece of conclusive evidence about the aetiology of homosexuality, for all its research into male and female hormones, body shape, the nervous system, brain functioning and so on. A credibility gap appeared, which the modern science of psychiatry attempted to plug. Theories of physical causation began to fade, superseded by a series of psychological theories based on early environmental factors.

These tended to explain male homosexuality as a reaction to a domineering mother and a weak father, the male child identifying with the parent of the wrong gender. Psychiatry accepted traditional male and female social roles as universal constants, ignoring all the anthropological evidence to the contrary. Lesbianism was seen as simply one more baneful consequence of penis envy, the jealous woman trying to cheat her way into the gender which possessed Freud's most coveted symbol. Psychiatric theories had one big advantage over earlier physical explanations: they could not be disproved. Hormone levels could be measured, but psychiatric theories were circular constructions which made the psychiatrist the ultimate arbiter of normality and abnormality. He alone decided when a mother became 'domineering' or when a father qualified as 'weak'.

Freudian theory took an ambivalent attitude to homosexuality. It recognised the homosexual element in human sexuality, treating it as a natural, biological activity rather than a bizarre perversion. Freud considered all children to be bisexual, learning to follow a fixed sexual orientation during puberty. He conceptualised a basic sexuality that was 'polymorphous perverse', arguing that the entire

body was capable of erogenous response, not merely the genitals.

On the other hand, Freud correctly observed that most people outgrow their early bisexuality to find pleasure in heterosexual intercourse only. Polymorphous perversity fades and human sexual response becomes concentrated in the genital regions. From these observations of Western society, Freud extrapolated a series of value-judgements: that homosexuality was an immature form of sexual expression; that it could not lead to the 'real' fulfilment of heterosexual intercourse; that it was a symptom of neurotic illness. Even as he unleashed his radical insights on the world, Freud provided a rationale with which to contain them.

As a discipline, psychiatry shied away from the sexual radicalism at the heart of Freudian theory to become an instrument of subtle repression. Psychiatrists made pronouncements on the nature of homosexuality and homosexual people which were little more than popular prejudice dressed up in pompous jargon. Homosexuality was an immature form of sexual activity, caused by the arresting of sexual development at an early (anal) phase. Male homosexuals were caricatured as immature, unhappy individuals with an over-strong attachment to their mothers, psychologically incapable of establishing lasting, loving relationships. Psychiatrists never seemed to consider that they were forming their impressions of homosexuals from the small, unrepresentative sample of institutionalised individuals with whom they came into contact. Nor did they seem to allow for the role social factors played in causing homosexual misery and alienation.

Repressive medical practice towards homosexuals reached its climax in the detached sadism of electro-convulsive-therapy, a form of medical treatment now generally abandoned in the West, except in

the case of certain forms of depression. For the treatment of homosexuality, ECT consisted of showing a subject a picture of his or her lover, or a nude photograph of someone of the same sex, and then administering an electric shock. This association of love and sex with pain and guilt represents puritanism at its most horrifically dessiccated. ECT was an ordeal meted out to thousands of homosexuals in the 1950s and 1960s, often as an 'enlightened' alternative to a spell in prison.

Psychiatric ideas began to filter through to the lay public after the Second World War, particularly in America. Writers, naturally enough in view of their interest in human nature, were quick to plunder psychiatric theory for their own ends. American authors, in particular, were keen magpies; working in a literary tradition which had always extolled the individual, and influenced by the neo-Freudian concepts of American psychiatric thinking, they concentrated on the psychology of individual homosexuals rather than the social causes of their alienation.

The homosexual drama of the 1960s became a display of fixed types. Homosexual people were portrayed as inhabiting a twilight zone between the sexes, belonging to one of two groups: the butch dyke or the screaming queen.

The stereotyped lesbian was sporty or tweedy, liked to compete with men, and behaved in an aggressive, domineering manner. 'There wasn't enough material to make a man of you, and for a woman you've got too much brain',[3] Lulu had said in Pandora's Box. A similar attitude was still active fifty years later, except that the hermaphroditism had become primarily psychological.

However, since heterosexism[4] causes all relationships to be viewed in heterosexual terms, a complementary stereotype needs to be called into existence.[5] This is the 'femme' lesbian, a weak, shiftless character who needs a man to take care of her, but is so helpless that she falls prey to the seductive wiles of the butch dyke. This meek and mild figure excites less hatred than the 'true' lesbian, because her complete submissiveness is considered proper behaviour for a woman. The femme lesbian might still become normal if rescued from the clutches of her predatory partner.

The two main characters in The Killing of Sister George fit these silly stereotypes with mathematical precision. Written by Frank Marcus in 1965, the text traps its characters in behavioural armour. One can easily compile a list of traits that mark George out as the archetypal butch dyke. She:

is domineering and bossy
smokes cigars
wears 'mannish' clothes
uses coarse language
served in the Army
collects horse-brasses
feels contempt for sensitive people
takes the sadistic role in sado-masochistic games
has no sexual feelings at all for men
pays the rent/ is the 'man of the house'
has a masculine nickname

In contrast, Childie:

is submissive and weak-willed
writes poetry
wears 'feminine' clothes
is upset by coarse language
collects dolls

takes the masochistic role in sado-masochistic games

has some sexual feelings for men, or is at least capable of being seduced by either sex (i.e., is a passive sexual object)

cooks and cleans up/is the 'woman' of the house

has a babyish nickname

Both lists could be extended, but the point is plain enough. Marcus' characterisations are constructed from a series of prejudices and false ideas, making George and Childie into Identi-kit lesbians rather than recognisable human beings.

The Killing Of Sister George was intended to be a comedy, of course, and most comedy works through a degree of stylisation and exaggeration. The crucial difference is that the audience accepts the exaggeration of an Orgon or a Harpagon as an artistic convention; in contrast, The Killing Of Sister George traded in distortions that were widely held to be true. The play parodied the cosy world of rural soap opera, and in so doing implied that the world it showed in contrast (the lesbian lifestyle of June Buckridge) was more real. Yet the private life of George and Childie is as far-fetched as the harmonious idyll of Applehurst. The Killing Of Sister George mocks the banality of soap opera, but is itself guilty of a different banality. In the distorting mirror of the play, lesbians are depicted as either butch or femme and spend their lives trapped in unhappy, destructive relationships.

Naturally, people who fit the stereotypes do exist, even if they are less common than believed. The essential point is that any stereotype is a public persona, and that a domestic drama purporting to contain psychological insight should sneak underneath the mask to the person behind it. However, Marcus fails to add new facets to his characters as the play progresses, or to create any

of the contradictions of real human beings. Audiences have to be satisfied with two static masks.

Mrs Mercy seems a more subtle dramatic creation on first sight. She is neither a simpering wimp like Childie nor a sadistic virago like George. On closer examination, though, she is little more than a sophisticated dangerous lesbian, a less strident version of the butch dyke. She has succeeded in a man's world and immediately adopts the 'masculine' role vis-a-vis Childie, offering her work as her secretary and somewhere to live. George and Mrs Mercy are depicted as surrogate men fighting over the helpless, passive Childie. And Mrs Mercy's schemes to steal George's girlfriend confirm yet another prejudice about lesbians: that they are treacherous and amoral.

It is clear from reviews that the actors did not underplay their roles. Theatre World opined, rather self-righteously, that 'there was not much good and certainly nothing clean about Sister George'.[6] Michael Billington bluntly describes Sister George as a 'tweedy, cigar-smoking, brown-stockinged Lesbian'[7], proving that nothing happened in performance to play down the stereotyping.

Until recently, so few plays were written about lesbianism that almost any drama on the subject was welcome, if only because it broke the silence. The Killing Of Sister George, though, was responsible for spreading a great deal of confusion and misinformation. Its content was fanciful and negative; its attitude veered between pity, condescension and ridicule. The play has become popular with local amateur groups, attracted by its domestic sets and a small, all-female cast. It formed the basis for a well-known movie, mainly remembered for a scene set in a lesbian night-club; (this scene is

not in the stage play). The Killing Of Sister George, then, provided thousands of people with their first (and sometimes only) view of lesbianism. The photographs it snapped were distorted, but most people were not in a position to know that; it must be assumed that many believed it to be an accurate reflection of lesbian life.

The male complement to the butch dyke is the screaming queen. It is as easy to draw up a list of his character traits. He:

> walks and talks in a 'feminine' way
> is full of fussy affectations and mannerisms
> is flighty and superficial
> gossips and bitches
> is sensitive, but effete
> follows 'feminine' pursuits, such as cooking, fashion and the arts
> has a job in the arts or the beauty profession
> makes silly, camp jokes all the time
> is desperately sad beneath his surface gaiety

The 1960s saw several plays containing homosexual men of this type, ranging from those who fitted the stereotype perfectly to subtle variations on the basic model. Emory from The Boys In The Band epitomises the screaming queen. He is a weakling and a coward, loves to fuss around in the kitchen, calls everyone by the pronoun 'she', invents feminine nicknames for the other characters, cracks an endless stream of camp jokes and screams his way through the play from his first entrance to his final exit. The characters of Staircase are older, less strident versions of the same type who spend their time snapping bitchily at each other. Judging from the way the characters were acted in the film based on the play,[8] they were portrayed with their full quota of effeminate mannerisms and

gestures. One reviewer stated that 'Mr Scofield, blanched and desperate, runs through the whole repertoire of male effeminacy'[9] which leaves little doubt as to how the play was acted. The 1960s marked the heyday of the screaming queen when a stage homosexual without a limp wrist became an endangered species.

As in the case of the butch dyke, the screaming queen was not a complete figment of the imagination. Many homosexual men did mimic 'feminine' behaviour, and every man on the gay scene must know at least one person who could have served as a model for Emory. But the frequency with which the screaming queen appeared suggests that he served a function, cushioning the audience from the homosexual content of the drama. Authors were creating openly homosexual characters for the first time, but in the process they denied these characters dignity. Less well-intentioned authors merely used the butch dyke and the screaming queen to earn a few cheap laughs. Plays like Staircase were the dramatic equivalent of racist jokes, extracting humour by drawing on what was virtually a conditioned reflex. Inferior wit was disguised by aiming it at a sitting target.

Unusual people make for striking dramatic characters, so it is easy to understand the attraction that the butch dyke and the screaming queen held for playwrights. Stage homosexuals began to be portrayed, though, with such monotonous uniformity that, far from being daring or exciting, they became utterly safe. With every flick of a limp wrist, audiences saw their prejudices confirmed and reinforced. Homosexuality could no longer be swept under the carpet, but was again rendered harmless by the device of stereotyping. The universality of homosexual desire was denied by attributing it to a few bizarre individuals.

Not all drama relied on extreme stereotyping. The screaming queen was sometimes replaced by a softer figure, gentle and 'feminine' without being camp; for example, Geoff in Shelagh Delaney's A Taste Of Honey. Geoff is an art student with a talent for traditionally feminine pursuits; a gentle and kind, but rather weak-willed, man. However, he is not flighty or brittle, and audiences were spared the predictable stream of camp jokes. Delaney's attitude shows genuine sympathy; her portrayal of Geoff, even if somewhat stereotyped, fills out into a rich characterisation.

However, no amount of sympathy can compensate for the lack of a wider, social perspective. Audiences were meant to like Geoff in spite of his homosexuality, but were not required to think beyond this rather facile tolerance. In spite of her gentler approach, Delaney creates the character of Geoff out of the same misconceptions as the other playwrights of her day: male homosexuality remains a product of insufficient virility, a failure to achieve complete masculinity.

Nearly every stage homosexual fitted the stereotype of the screaming queen or the softer alternative of the gentle victim.[10] Clearly, this represented a gross distortion and simplification of a complex reality, an enlargement of one element of homosexual life until it became representative of homosexuality in general. In the public mind, male homosexuality had become synonymous with transvestism and transexuality, a confusion the stage did nothing whatsoever to dispel.

The other constant of the period was a supposed link between homosexuality and unhappiness. The flamboyant fairy wrinkled

and sagged into a miserable old age and was transformed into the sad old queen, pathetically clinging to the last vestiges of his youth, lonely, embittered, unloved and unloveable. This figure may have arisen from the best of intentions, but the assumption that homosexuality inevitably led to an unhappy life did nothing to raise homosexual expectations. Pity is no substitute for respect, and the sad old queen lacked the dignity accorded to even the most nefarious of dramatic characters. However, pity served the purpose of advancing basic rights such as legality. Proponents of legal reform generally argued that homosexuals were victims of their biology or their upbringing, tragic figures helpless to change their 'condition'. Much of the sympathy may have been condescending, but it often represented a sincere effort to bring about liberalisation of attitudes and law.

Age is a dominant concern in many plays of the period. The Madness Of Lady Bright (Lanford Wilson, 1964) is the story of Leslie Bright, a forty-year-old 'screaming, preening queen, rapidly losing a long kept beauty'.[11] Written for an off-off-Broadway production at the Caffe Cino, the play shows Lady Bright alone in his one-room apartment in New York, holding imaginary conversations with figures from his past. His wall is covered with the signatures of the men he has had sex with over the past twenty years, but only two of these people mattered to him, and even these contacts had been ephemeral. During the course of the play, the audience witnesses Lady Bright's final descent into madness. The play ends with an insane Lady Bright repeating over and over to himself, 'Take me home. Take me home. Take me home.'.[12]

Physical beauty is the most important thing in the superficial world of Lady Bright who has spent his life picking up one-night-

stands in New York's seedy gay bars. Now that age has stolen his good looks, he has nothing to offer these passing strangers. He sits at home, in solitude, unsuccessfully trying to reach so-called friends on the phone. Thoughts of his fading youth torment him:

> I have varicose veins in my legs. I can't wear hose. I have hideous, dreadful legs. I have blue, purple, BLACK veins in my legs. They give me pain - they make me limp, they ache, they're ugly. They used to be beautiful and they are bony and ugly.[13]

Wilson depicted the big-city loneliness of his promiscuous homosexual with commendable frankness, particularly in the cautious mood of 1964, but his play is fatally weakened by distortion and omission. The Madness Of Lady Bright is a skeletal character-study that stimulates pity without understanding. Lady Bright's sexuality is divorced from the rest of his life and is assumed to be sufficient reason alone to send him plummetting into insanity. There is little sense that Leslie Bright eats, sleeps and works, or that these aspects of his life have any real significance; as often happens, the male homosexual is defined purely in terms of his sexuality. Admittedly, the text was never meant to bear the detail of a piece of naturalism, but without some sense of psychological truth, Lady Bright's plunge into madness seems false and melodramatic.

Having forged both a striking character and a potent symbol in the figure of Lady Bright, Wilson wastes the opportunities he has created for himself. Leslie Bright is a victim of a society which places a high premium on youth and beauty, but this central issue is never plumbed to any depth. I suspect that Wilson became dazzled by the audacity of his theatrical creation and came to rely on spectacle alone for dramatic effect. Image triumphed over idea,

and his play is disappointingly vacuous. For all its good intentions and its undeniable power, The Madness Of Lady Bright merely confirms the sad old queen stereotype with a vengeance, asking nothing more than boundless sympathy from an audience.

The loss of physical beauty also forms an important motif in Charles Dyer's Staircase, (1966). Take, for example, the following speech:

> We're all depreciating, mate. What about my varicose veins? - me legs're like fouled parrots' perches. Can hardly get my wind, & I haven't seen my knee-caps since Fifty-Three.[14]

These lines could virtually replace those quoted from The Madness Of Lady Bright by the simple expedient of changing the English slang into American. But Harry and Charlie, the central characters of Staircase, ought not to be quite as lonely as Lady Bright. At least they have each other.

However, Dyer rarely shows their relationship as healthy or supportive, for the two men spend the play swiping one another with bitchy comments. Each is obsessed with his own problems: Charlie fretting over his fading looks and his summons to court, Harry plagued by a sense of insignificance and fears of encroaching baldness. Their attempts to make loving contact are doomed to humiliating failure:

> CHARLIE: I think you're ... (and in a whisper) a beautiful old stick.
> (But Harry doesn't hear Charlie's whisper)
> HARRY: Pardon? ... I couldn't hear, Charlie ...
> CHARLIE: Oh belt up, and give me breathing space.
> (He elbows Harry away.)[15]

Charlie and Harry are bound together by a fear of being alone. Doubtless many homosexual (and heterosexual) couples do stay together for this reason and find themselves trapped in lonely, destructive relationships. However, Dyer seems to assume that this loneliness is endemic to homosexual partnerships and an inevitable part of homosexual life.

The major reason for this, it is suggested, is that a homosexual couple cannot have children: 'Ah, but Charlie, if you and me ... if we could've had a little lad of our own.'.[16] A cynic might ask whether children are always such a boon to a relationship and find this belief sentimental. Dyer seems incapable of looking beyond traditional heterosexist assumptions; he never considers that many heterosexual couples have to adapt to being childless, or choose to remain so. He sees Harry and Charlie's relationship as a parody of 'real' marriage, a travesty doomed to pathetic failure. It can never be joyful or fulfilling because it falls short of its heterosexual model, lacking the vital ingredients of children and a marriage certificate.

Harry and Charlie are ashamed of one another and desperately try to hide their relationship from the world. Charlies manipulates events to make sure that his daughter only calls when Harry is out. Harry, for his part, pretends to the corner chemist that he has a wife: 'And ever after they kept asking: 'How's your wife?' Oh, I loved it. Loved having a wife.'.[17]

The two men accept the world's low opinion of them and have internalised society's negative attitudes. Staircase is typical of 1960s drama in that it advocated sympathy towards homosexuals while implicitly accepting the prejudices which oppress them. It gave

a detailed portrayal of the problems homosexual people had to face at the time, but created a world which was closed to change. The play grew out of the same ideology which fired homosexual oppression. Audiences were allowed to feel sorry for Harry and Charlie, but from a position of heterosexual superiority which the play subtly endorsed. Virtually everyone - heterosexual and homosexual alike - agreed that heterosexuality was a desired norm to which all should aspire.

Staircase ends on a Pirandellian note, when Harry and Charlie notice that their names are anagrams of each other, as are the names of all the other people mentioned during the play. Dyer explains in a note that 'During the writing I began to feel, I think, that Charlie is alone.'[18]. Thus the two men are not merely screaming queens, flailing around in neurotic misery, the height of which is Charlie's farcical attempt to commit suicide; they may even be the fantasies of one warped mind. Outlandish psychology is given utter license, and the homosexual as neurotic merges into the homosexual as psychotic.

'Who was it that used to always say "You show me a happy homosexual and I'll show you a gay corpse".'[19] This quote comes close to summing up the message behind Mart Crowley's The Boys In The Band, (1968).

Receding hairlines again form a prominent feature in this slice of gay subculture. So does encroaching old age, the difference being that the age of crisis has come down to around thirty, that of the play's hero, Michael. Even the text's dramatis personae mirrors this obsession with age and physical beauty:

MICHAEL, Thirty, average face, smartly groomed.
DONALD, Twenty-eight, medium blond, wholesome American good looks.
EMORY, Thirty-three, small, frail, very plain.
LARRY, Twenty-nine, extremely handsome ...[20]

This perfunctory summing-up (age plus attractiveness-rating) reflects the New York gay scene depicted in the play. In the superficial world which rejected Lady Bright once the bloom of youth faded, all that matters is age and physical appearance.

The characters in The Boys In The Band might make up the casualty ward at a psychiatric clinic. Michael suffers from 'icks', the lyrical phrase he uses to describe his anxiety attacks. Donald is addicted to his regular visit to his psychoanalyst. Larry and Hank have a relationship continually on the verge of collapse, primarily on account of Larry's penchant for an occasional sexual peccadillo. Harold only feels confident enough to appear in public after he has spent hours in front of the mirror grooming himself for the ordeal. This sea of troubles swells over at a birthday party, when a drunken Michael initiates a game (shades of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?) in which the characters have to ring up the person they have loved most in their life and confess their love.

This misery takes place against the general background of New York's gay scene, a Darwinian jungle of bitchery and butchery, where the usual form of contact is the one-night-stand. The characters have eyes on the look-out to discover a quick pick-up and tongues at the ready to deliver a quick put-down. A typically chummy slice of dialogue runs:

HAROLD: Guilt turns to hostility. Isn't that right, Michael?
MICHAEL: Go stick your tweezers in your cheek.

LARRY: I'm fed up to the teeth with everybody feeling so goddamn sorry for poor shat-upon Hank.
EMORY: Aw, Larry, everybody knows you're Frieda Fickle.[21]

The implication is that profound unhappiness underlies this verbal savagery. The characters are taking out their self-hatred on each other: 'Guilt turns to hostility'.[22] Near the end of the play, during an attack of 'icks', Michael says to Donald, 'If we ... if we could just ... not hate ourselves so much.'.[23] At least Donald's reply ('Maybe with a lot more work you can help yourself some more - if you try')[24] shows a glimpse of hope for the future.

Crowley does not make the same mistake as many other authors and place his characters in a social vacuum. On the contrary, he draws the New York male gay scene in considerable detail, depicting a world where ostentatious gaiety masks loneliness and sorrow, and where the only joy is the transitory pleasure of the one-night-stand. At least this roots Crowley's play in some sort of social reality and he therefore avoids the empty psychological pyrotechnics of Staircase and The Madness Of Lady Bright. Surely, though, his play could have contained one character who was reasonably contented with his lot, if only for the sake of variety.

Crowley's depiction of the late-sixties New York gay scene may have been refreshingly frank, but this was only one small part of homosexual life. Most homosexuals had no contact with the gay world and probably felt as distanced from it as the heterosexual majority. Crowley also seems to have exaggerated the negative aspects of life within this social group. Many people enjoyed being part of this embryonic gay subculture and were happily adjusted to its mores and lifestyle. Of course, every play needs to make a definite statement

and cannot be all things to all people; unfortunately, Crowley's puts forward a simplistic, conventional view of male homosexuality. A varied set of characters would not only have made his play more interesting, it might also have led audiences to question received ideas.

Crowley's characters make up a rather bizarre bunch with their funny mannerisms and psychological ailments. They also reinforce the stereotype of the sad old queen with gusto. His age may have been halved, but his despair is every bit as strong. Crowley hints of a way out of this impasse - learning to overcome internalised self-hatred - but even he seems doubtful if this will ever be possible. Essentially the play never escapes the limits imposed by the dominant idea of the period: that, by nature, homosexuals are destined to a life-time of misery.

Ageing lesbians are no happier, according to The Killing Of Sister George. They may not share the obsession with wrinkles and varicose veins, but George and Childie also live in fear of Time's winged chariot. George's career threatens to collapse once the BBC writes her out of the Applehurst series, and Childie refuses to face up to the fact that she has reached her early thirties. Terrified of adult responsibilities, she still tries to look and dress like someone in her late teens. (Interestingly, the 'masculine' partner has problems involving her career, while the 'feminine' partner worries about her physical appearance.)

Their relationship has deteriorated into perpetual bickering and vicious rows. Fear of loneliness binds them together and they bring each other far more pain than pleasure. Even at their happiest,

they never fully escaped what Marcus considers to be the inevitable loneliness of their inversion. When George says 'You haven't been lonely, exactly',[25] Childie rapidly changes the subject.

Marcus' play is built on the same heterosexist assumptions as Staircase and suggests identical reasons for the collapse of the homosexual relationship. First, homosexual partners cannot marry. When, during a fit of jealousy, George forbids her to speak to the lodger downstairs, Childie screams 'I'm not married to you, you know.'.[26] The stage directions stress that this outburst should be followed by a long silence to allow this awful fact to sink home.

Also, homosexual partners can never have children. 'I might have had babies'[27] Childie muses at one point (although one could only pity any child unfortunate enough to be entrusted to her care). Childie's dolls are presumably substitute babies which placate her frustrated maternal instincts. (George, of course, has no such instincts.) For all its professed sympathy, the final message of Marcus' play is crystal-clear: lesbians must always remain unfulfilled because they cannot assume the proper female roles of wife and mother.

During the 1960s, homosexual drama promoted the fiction that all homosexuals live tragically unhappy lives, especially once their youth has faded. It is certainly true that old age causes problems for everyone in a society which places a premium on youth. However, 1960s drama assumed these problems were especially acute for homosexual people, who could never have the security that comes with marriage and children. Such an attitude seems almost quaint against the background of what were alleged to be the swinging

sixties, since it is based on a naive and sentimentalised vision of marriage and parenthood. Psychological theories which stressed the tragedy of being homosexual and the inability of homosexuals to form loving, lasting relationships had taken their toll. The change from homosexuality as vice to homosexuality as mental illness, a transition which had taken about a hundred years, was virtually complete.

Misery took place alongside extreme stereotyping; the archetypal homosexual figure became suicidal and androgynous. Judging from the movies based on Staircase, The Boys In The Band and The Killing Of Sister George, acting style did nothing to counteract the distortions present in the writing. The reviews already mentioned underline this. Furthermore, this went deeper than outward mannerisms of limp wrists and camp dialogue; the inner psychology of characters was also being twisted into weird and wonderful shapes to satisfy the uninformed expectations of the time.

It is doubtful if stereotypes can ever be eliminated, either in life or on the stage, since they are a product of the need to conceptualise the chaos of reality and reduce it to workable proportions. They even serve a useful function in this way and often contain a grain of truth. However, stereotypes also fuel irrational prejudice, even hatred, particularly of minorities. By establishing false truths, they conceal and sustain ignorance and close people's minds to fresh ideas. Stereotypes have a special function in the drama, acting as signs through which the playwright can impart instant information. The theatre would often need to be extremely long-winded if authors could not utilise preconceived ideas of how various groups of people look and behave.

The butch dyke and the screaming queen were ubiquitous figures throughout the drama of the 1960s. There was little difference, for instance, between the way homosexual men were depicted on either side of the Atlantic. The American queen, such as Emory or Lady Bright, may have shown a more acerbic, aggressive side to his nature and been more willing to outrage the rest of the world, but the difference was one of degree rather than kind. In general, homosexuals were portrayed with mind-numbing uniformity.

Audiences were meant to accept homosexual stereotypes as the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Faced with a world of which they were totally ignorant, but had seen 'exposed' occasionally in the Sunday tabloids, people tended to believe what they were shown. Most theatregoers recognised the stage Cockney as a theatrical convention; the same could not be said for the new homosexual figures strutting their hour upon the stage.

The attitude that lay behind homosexual stereotyping was smug and condescending. At best, stage homosexuals were pitiable victims to be sympathised with; at worst, they were figures of fun to be patronised and laughed at. Nevertheless, the one-dimensional characters of the sixties served a vital function. By watching these stereotypes, the theatre-going public gradually became acclimatised to the idea of a homosexual character, even if it picked up a distorted view in the process.

It is easy for us to criticise these plays from the viewpoint of the 1980s, but one must never underestimate the giant leap they represented. Unambiguous homosexual characters had not been seen on the mainstream British stage for over two-hundred years. Reviewers of the time recognised these scripts for the radical

documents they were. The critic from The New York Times described The Boys In The Band as 'by far the frankest treatment of homosexuality I have ever seen on the stage'.[28] The New York Post agreed: 'All the once forbidden words are there, and the action is highly explicit'.[29] Michael Billington, reviewing The Killing Of Sister George in Britain, said that 'At last a homosexual relationship has been greeted with simple acceptance by the author, the characters and the audience.'.[30]

We may now be more critical and not accept this relationship with quite the same enthusiasm, tending instead to censure its stereotypical nature. Many homosexuals of the period also recognised its gross distortion, reacted against this stereotyping and started to insist on representing themselves. The next decade was to witness the birth of a radically different type of theatre, the first gay drama.

6. CENSORING THE CENSOR

The development of homosexual drama was greatly advanced by a further product of the liberalisation of post-war Britain: the abolition of stage censorship. The figure of the Lord Chamberlain (and his predecessor, the Master of the Revels) can be traced back to the Elizabethan stage, when plays were more likely to be censored for political than sexual content. The ultimate power of the Lord Chamberlain - in reality, the power to ban anything for any reason with no right of appeal - dated from the Licensing Act of 1737, which Walpole slipped through parliament to protect himself from political satire.

Overt political censorship became less frequent over the following two centuries, as the Lord Chamberlain started to concern himself more with sexual morality. Many subjects (including homosexuality) were strictly taboo and several excellent plays were considered too strong for British taste: Ibsen's Ghosts, Strindberg's Miss Julie, Brieux's Damaged Goods, Shaw's Mrs Warren's Profession, Pirandello's Six Characters In Search Of An Author, O'Neill's Desire Under The Elms, Wilde's Salomé, Schnitzler's La Ronde. One might conclude that the better the play, the more likely it was to meet censorship. Furthermore, the banning of performances of Lysistrata shows that not even the label of 'classic' could guarantee immunity from the blue pencil.

The plays on the above list offended on account of their sexual content, because they mention topics such as prostitution, venereal disease and promiscuity. Homosexuality was even more likely to

exact censorship. The Children's Hour was not licensed in Britain until twenty years after it was written; Spring Awakening had to wait until 1964 (and was only passed subject to heavy cuts, which included the homosexual scene in its entirety); Huis Clos, A View From The Bridge, Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, South and most of the other plays already discussed failed to satisfy the Lord Chamberlain's requirements. Homosexuality was effectively banned from public discussion or representation, and The Green Bay Tree was almost the only fish which managed to wriggle through the censor's net. And if this handful of plays on homosexuality were smothered into theatrical extinction, who can guess how many more were never written because authors felt that the act of writing them would be futile.

Opposition to the post of Lord Chamberlain originated among a few Victorian iconoclasts, but grew more general after the social upheavals of the Second World War. The Lord Chamberlain himself became more liberal in his decisions, allowing words and phrases he would have expunged a few years earlier. However, this relaxation of standards failed to pacify a generation of young writers who wanted to place a new range of subjects on the public stage.

War broke out between the Lord Chamberlain and these angry young playwrights. The writer most often at odds with the official was John Osborne, at that time the enfant terrible of the British stage. Osborne had successfully applied for the inclusion of a scene in Inadmissible Evidence where a man spoke of making homosexual love in a car. But there could be no compromise when he submitted A Patriot For Me for approval in 1964. The Lord Chamberlain simply could not accept a play which the reviewer in The Stage was to term 'thoroughly, uncompromisingly, naturally homosexual', and a

head-on collision became inevitable.

A Patriot For Me is set during the years 1890 - 1913 and follows an Austrian spy of humble origins on his way up the career ladder. Redl has a definite talent for the business of espionage, but the enemy learn of his Achilles' heel, his homosexuality, and blackmail him into handing over state secrets. Once this comes to light, Redl's glittering career collapses and the play finishes with him committing suicide in an attempt to hush up the resulting scandal.

There seems little here to seriously offend the Lord Chamberlain. Blackmail had been the subject of a highly successful film, Victim, and was one of the arguments frequently advanced for legal reform. Traditional morality was placated by the suicidal ending and the historical setting helped to distance the play's subject-matter from contemporary reality. However, Osborne had broken the rules by refusing to talk in euphemisms and drop subtle hints. Not a writer renowned for his subtlety, he insisted on spelling everything out in graphic detail. The Lord Chamberlain's standards may have relaxed considerably (a writer could depict homosexuals on stage, or even mention sex as long as he used decorous language) but intimate physical contact was out of the question.

Thus, the Lord Chamberlain laid down the stark stipulation

that 'the two men must not be in bed together'. He also seemed determined to root out homosexual contact of any kind, in or out of the bedroom. The whole of Act 3, Scene 5 met with his disapproval, for instance, the only credible reason being the way Redl cradles Viktor's head in his arms at one point. Homosexual characters could now talk on stage but must never touch.

Even their talk had to be restrained. The Lord Chamberlain rejected several words and phrases from A Patriot For Me: 'clap', 'crabs', 'Tears of Christ!'[3]. However, this was standard procedure and these words would probably have been pencilled out of any text, whatever its theme. More significant are the long speeches to which the Lord Chamberlain took exception, most notably the following lines in which Redl speaks passionately of Stefan's body:

> ... you'll never know that body like I know it. The lines beneath his eyes. Do you know how many there are, do you know one has less than the other? And the scar behind his ear, and the hairs in his nostrils, which has the most, what colour they are in what light? The mole on where? Where, Sophia? I know the place here, between the eyes, the dark patches like slate - like blue when he's tired, really tired, the place for a blow or a kiss or a bullet. You'll never know like I know, you can't. The backs of his knees, the pattern on the soles of his feet. Which trouble him, and so I used to wash them and bathe them for hours. His thick waist, and how long are his thighs, compared to his calves, you've not looked at him, you never will. [4]

Since this speech contains no 'offensive' words and makes no mention of traditional erogenous zones, one surmises that the Lord Chamberlain objected to its general tone. A speech where a man spoke of a woman in this way would not have been censored, and clearly it is the homosexual nature of the passion that earned official disapproval. Banning the discussion of the colour of someone's nostrils seems a particularly bizarre decision, even by the Lord Chamberlain's standards, and proves just how sensitive the whole subject of homosexuality was still felt to be. Liberalisation may have made the mention of homosexuality possible, but its depiction on stage still had to remain completely asexual.

The Lord Chamberlain objected to other scenes in their entirety; their sexual frankness again seems the likely cause. Act 1, Scene 10

shows Redl in bed with a male prostitute, while Act 3, Scene 5 depicts a bitter lovers' tiff between Redl and Viktor. Viciously cruel, Redl exorcises his own self-hatred on the boy, who falls into uncontrollable sobbing beneath this brutal barrage. Yet the scene ends in reconciliation, with Redl cradling Viktor in his arms and whispering:

> You are beautiful ... You always will be ...
> There, baby, there ... Baby ... It won't last ...
> All over, baby ...[5]

One other scene offended the Lord Chamberlain so deeply that he ordered it expunged entirely: the Drag Ball of Act 2, Scene 1 (in which, incidentally, George Devine himself played the part of what one reviewer called 'a be-tiaraed grande dame').[6] There seems little logic or consistency behind the Lord Chamberlain's decisions as to what was acceptable on stage, for he passed Staircase (with its even grosser effeminate caricatures) at roughly the same time. It seems that the official baulked at showing men dressed up as women, and yet this was a stage device with a long tradition and seen as perfectly acceptable in plays such as Charlie's Aunt. There seems little difference between the camp repartee of the Drag Ball and that of other plays of the 1960s. The gossip and backbiting and the change of gender in pronouns have a familiar ring, and lines like these could come from one of several plays:

> KUNZ: Who's the little flower with Redl?
> BARON: No idea. Something's made her wilt.[7]

The vital difference must be one of tone; Osborne refused to play down the sexuality of the situation. Unlike the homosexuals of Dyer or Marcus or Williams, these characters are eager for sex.

Lines like 'Do you want the Tsarina? She's Kunz's really, but she's pretty available'[8] offended puritan values by their acceptance of casual homosexual desire.

Furthermore, Osborne made no attempt to call on his audience's sympathy. His portrayal of the Drag Ball might be accused of sensationalism, but at least he avoided the patronising sentimentality which cast the homosexual in the role of tragic victim. The spectator had no chance to feel self-righteously superior to the unfortunates on stage, as the stage directions made quite clear:

> The music is gay, everyone chatters happily like a lot of birds and the atmosphere is generally relaxed and informal, in contrast to the somewhat stiff atmosphere at the ball in Act 1.[9]

Far from suffering from his sexual persuasion, as public opinion demanded, the Baron defends himself with a suave, self-assured defiance:

> And I'm quite happy as I am, I'm no criminal, thank you, and I don't corrupt anything that isn't already quite clearly corrupt, like this ghastly city. On the contrary, I bring style, wit, pleasure, energy, and good humour to it that it wouldn't otherwise have.[10]

Osborne broke the rules by showing that homosexuals could be happy, well-adjusted people. Officialdom might have regarded the Baron more favourably fifty years earlier, when he would have been recognised as the rich, decadent, evil homosexual who delighted in un-natural pleasures. But stereotypes had changed and the medical model of the homosexual as a pitiful victim had become the dominant one. Homosexuality had to be mentioned in hushed, tear-stained tones and with sufficient gravitas; sin was old-fashioned in a

post-Freudian world. When Osborne depicted some of his homosexuals as gay in the earlier sense of the word, and even showed their gathering as more 'relaxed and informal'[11] than the 'stiff atmosphere'[12] at the official ball, he trod on dangerous ground. The morality of his play was called into question because it did not discourage homosexuality by making it unpleasant, sordid and tragic.

To summarise, there seem three general reasons behind the Lord Chamberlain's objections to A Patriot For Me. Osborne would not avoid the sexuality of homosexual desire by the accepted euphemisms of language and stagecraft. He showed his characters in bed together; he used explicit (but hardly pornographic) language; his characters touched and caressed each other. His male affairs were unequivocally lovers, not friends bound in some kind of intense, platonic union.

Secondly, Osborne rejected the accepted liberal morality of the age by refusing to depict all homosexuals as people consumed by self- pity and self-disgust. Some were certainly unhappy - Redl had fought against his sexual inclinations with all his might - but others cheerfully accepted their homosexual feelings. Therefore, A Patriot For Me failed to deliver a stiff moral lesson: the wages of homosexuality was not always misery and suffering. Some of its characters actually enjoyed being homosexual!

Finally, Osborne did not draw his homosexual characters with stereotypical uniformity. Some had no effeminate mannerisms at all (if anything, Redl is a rather gruff, aggressive figure) while others went beyond the accepted limits of the queen stereotype to indulge in cross-dressing and female impersonation. And although effeminacy was de rigueur for male homosexual characters at the time, actual transvestism was taboo.

Osborne refused to accept the alterations 'requested' by the Lord Chamberlain, so his application for a licence was turned down. Eventually, the Royal Court staged A Patriot For Me as a 'club production', for members only, in the summer of 1965. It played to packed houses and won The Evening Standard award for the best play of the year, but lost the Royal Court a sum of £16,500, half of which Osborne personally bore. The most significant British playwright of the decade was being pilloried and censored which brought the post of Lord Chamberlain into even further disrepute. No other Western democracy humiliated its leading artists in this way.

However, Osborne had the last laugh, for episodes such as the protracted battle over A Patriot For Me hastened the demise of the office of Lord Chamberlain in Britain. Most people realised that censorship had to come to an end or British drama would remain half-a-century behind real events. Osborne also had the pleasure of a second revenge twenty years later, when A Patriot For Me was finally staged in a West End theatre and became an acclaimed success.

Ironically, the play which one critic of the time had called 'of historic importance theatrically'[13] now seems rather reactionary in parts. The Drag Ball feels sensationalistic and irrelevant to the plot, little more than a colourful display to spice up the evening's entertainment. Osborne's stage directions, where he lists the types of homosexuals one finds at a Drag Ball, as if all homosexuals could be categorised into a few oddball compartments, seem offensive to modern sensibilities. Even so, A Patriot For Me advanced homosexual drama considerably, not least because of its role in hastening the abolition of stage censorship. Had the post

of Lord Chamberlain staggered on into the 1970s, it is doubtful whether gay drama could have taken off in the way it did.

Stage censorship and homosexual drama have been closely linked during this century. An informal censorship of homosexuality existed prior to this, with no attempt made to raise the subject. However, this unofficial censorship broke down once the new, scientific ideas of the late 19th century began to gain dramatic expression. The authorities took action against playwrights who had the temerity to break the taboo and banned all plays with even a hint of homosexual content.

Once the subject of homosexuality peeped out from behind the closet door, a period of self-imposed censorship ensued. Writers kept an eye on the censor and protected themselves by creating characters of uncertain sexual orientation. A play's chances of survival were further enhanced if these characters were killed off towards the end, particularly in an act of suicide.

Once standards relaxed to the extent that homosexuals could be portrayed openly and identified as homosexual, a different set of rules emerged. There could be no physical contact or suggestive language; characters had to conform to fixed types and to stay within certain boundaries (no drag); they could never be portrayed as happy or well-adjusted. Nor should anyone assume that the eventual abolition of stage censorship has now led to a period of complete freedom. A personal prosecution can still be brought before the courts, as Mary Whitehouse did in her infamous action against The Romans In Britain. This is the imperfect system which exists in the present day.

The abolition of the post of Lord Chamberlain was a vital step in the emergence of a specifically homosexual drama. The years after the Second World War saw a gradual revolution in the British theatre, but this would have come to a halt had censorship prevailed. The consequences for homosexual art were striking; the subject which Brick and Big Daddy had struggled even to mention was discussed quite freely a decade later.

The cost of this advance was extreme stereotyping. Also, the new visibility applied only to male homosexuality, with lesbianism remaining as hidden as ever. In the first half of this century, when homosexuality was barely acknowledged at all in the theatre, plays were as likely to feature lesbians as male homosexuals: for every Dulcimer there was a Countess Geschwitz. Yet <u>The Killing Of Sister George</u> stands almost alone in the 1950s and 1960s, in spite of a more relaxed theatrical climate. This reflected social history; male homosexuality was breaking barriers which still held lesbianism back. The word 'homosexual' was starting to accrete purely male connotations.

The slow, unsteady progress of the post-war period had its drawbacks and limitations; degrading stereotypes reinforced prejudice against homosexual men and silence continued to oppress homosexual women. The time was ripe for another leap forward. Unlike the developments of the previous two decades, though, this revolution would be neither gradual nor quiet. On the contrary, it would pride itself on how much noise it made.

SECTION 3

SPEAKING FOR OURSELVES: POLITICAL GAY THEATRE IN THE 1970s

INTRODUCTION

The history of homosexuality in Western society entered a new phase in the 1970s with the emergence of the Gay Liberation Front, a radical movement sparked off by the Stonewall riots of June 1969. The Stonewall was a gay bar in New York whose customers ejected the police one night after a routine episode of police harassment. Battles followed on the streets, and the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was born a few days afterwards.

The Stonewall riots have been accorded mythological significance within the gay community. There is certainly an intellectual satisfaction in definite moments which alter the course of history, but in truth the Stonewall riots were the inevitable product of slower, more profound changes in society. A generation of young homosexuals were growing up who had greater expectations than their predecessors and their cautious campaigning for homosexual reform. These young people were impatient and angry, and expected more from society than mere tolerance.

Although GLF was a short-lived movement, surviving for just a few years, its influence spread out of all proportion to its size or longevity. It did not cause any massive reforms in the law (the professional groups of the 1960s were more effective at this kind of lobbying) but its psychological impact can scarcely be under-estimated. GLF revolutionised the way homosexual people perceived themselves.

This change in attitude was captured in the word 'gay' which became a verbal symbol of everything the movement stood for. The

word had been used in homosexual circles for at least fifty years, but the young men and women of the new movement gave it a fresh significance. They pointed out that the word was the only one homosexuals had chosen freely for themselves, in contrast to the endless stream of offensive remarks which heterosexuals had coined: fairy, faggot, dyke, queer, bummer, poof, pansy. The new label 'gay' became an affirmation of homosexual feelings, a statement of homosexual anger and pride.

GLF was the first movement to attribute political significance to homosexual behaviour; homosexuality had always been the concern of doctors, psychiatrists and priests. A complete change of perspective resulted. Homosexual women and men became conceptualised as an oppressed minority and GLF constantly stressed its ideological links with the black and feminist movements. Collective action was advocated as a solution to isolated despair and a group of people who had been able to see no further than legality glimpsed a vision of total liberation. GLF replaced vague, apologetic pleas for tolerance with a set of arguments undermining heterosexual hegemony. Homosexuals became more confident; they aimed to make themselves a positive force for change in the world. They would no longer try to integrate with a rotten society which deliberately excluded them.

The Gay Liberation Front was a diverse mix of people who shared a dislike of hierarchical power structures; hence, it lacked official policy handed down from on high. Ideas tended to be circulated through long (and frequent) manifestos, but all local groups were autonomous and could reject policies agreed at national level. In theory, therefore, GLF had no official dogma written in stone -

such centralist rigidity would have been condemned as oppressive. However, in practice a series of approved standards emerged by general consensus and most people in the movement would have accepted the following ideas:

Gays should be proud of their sexuality and never feel inferior to straights;

Only a revolution in attitudes can truly liberate gay people. Reformist groups such as the Campaign for Homosexual Equality and the Albany Trust are doomed to fail because they try to accommodate to society instead of confronting its basic homophobia;

Gay people can only change their situation by coming together and acting collectively. Individual protest is futile;

The gay struggle is related to other fights for human rights, such as Black Power and Women's Liberation, and should work alongside these to forge a free society;

Gay people should 'come out' at work, to their families, to their friends;

Gay people should reject monogamous coupling, which is based on middle-class, heterosexist standards, and explore new forms of relationships;

The nuclear family is a root cause of gay oppression, since it inculcates sexist and heterosexist attitudes;

Existing gender-roles are artificially restrictive and twist the human personality into unhealthy distortions. Therefore, gay people, especially gay men, should try to transcend traditional gender-roles;

The fight against sexism is an integral part of the struggle for gay rights, for both lesbians and gay men, because their oppression stems from sexist attitudes;

Political and emotional reality cannot be separated from each other. The personal is political. (This conflicted with traditional Leftist thinking which argued that the root oppression was economic and that a concern with 'personal' issues was bourgeois and distracting);

The hierarchical power structures of most organisations, establishment or 'alternative', grow out of a masculine struggle for power, and need to be replaced by more flexible, democratic and collective decision making.

The emotions at the heart of the Gay Liberation Front were pride in being gay and anger with a history of oppression. GLF was fiercely political and held less radical groups in contempt for what it saw as their compromises with a homophobic world. Traditional gender-roles had to be smashed; heterosexual marriage was a hollow sham which gay people should never emulate; the sexist oppression of women had to be ended by the relinquishing of male privilege. GLF rhetoric was defiantly and self-consciously revolutionary.

In Britain, the energy behind GLF came from the expanding gay community which evolved after legalisation in 1967, and the ideas generated by GLF fed back into that community. Soon the plays of earlier years, with their tea and sympathy, appeared morbid and dated, and an audience quickly emerged who wanted a new type of gay theatre. The ridiculous, pathetic stereotypes of the 1960s earned the wrath of a confident generation of gay women and men

keen to throw off the chains of the past. Works less than ten years old seemed already to belong to another century; a radically different drama was necessary to reflect the reality of the early 1970s.

GLF was never a unified movement under a fixed leadership and made a conscious effort not to develop this kind of pyramidical structure. This made for a stimulating intellectual environment where a mistrust of dogma encouraged a fertile exchange of ideas and allowed the movement to be flexible and spontaneous in its response to events. However, the lack of a tight structure created difficulties, too. Energy was often dissipated in too many directions, and once the initial burst of inspiration had burnt itself out GLF had no firm framework to channel sustained growth.

A division existed within the movement between its radicals and its socialists (although this was a difference of emphasis rather than a conflict of basic ideologies). The radicals in GLF wanted nothing short of a revolutionary transformation of the entire social fabric. More active in America than in Britain, the radicals branded all existing social institutions as instruments of oppression, even the organisations of the Marxist Left. The greatest oppressors of all were traditional gender-roles, and the central concept of radical thinking was 'genderfuck', a deliberate attempt to confuse and reverse gender behaviour. Thus, the radicals delighted in cross-dressing, using long hair, make-up and transvestism to shock the general public and upset cultural norms. They argued that their revolution would succeed where all others had failed because they were attacking the root causes of oppression (sexism, heterosexism) and not its symptoms (economic inequality).

In contrast, the socialists within gay activism aimed to work alongside existing left-wing groups and to connect the gay struggle with the wider struggles of the working class. They tried to forge links with trade unions and left-wing political parties and accused the radicals of being middle-class, elitist and utopian, and of seeking to create change in an economic vacuum. For their part, the radicals pointed to socialist revolutions in Cuba and China which had failed to improve homosexual rights in those countries. They mocked and mistrusted the male chauvinism which dominated the straight Left and argued that socialist revolutions failed because they were never radical enough. Only a change in consciousness could truly liberate the masses.

One should not over-estimate these differences of opinion. GLF did not consist of two groups of activists at war with one another; most people belonged to a wider gay movement which accommodated both sets of opinions without undue strain. Points of agreement outweighed points of dispute. For all its structural looseness, the gay movement of the time was bound together by a sense of gay identity and a shared anger and pride.

This new sense of collective identity (and the politicisation that went alongside it) informed the best gay theatre of the decade ahead. Homosexual drama became intensely political in the 1970s, even when it eschewed overt polemic. A feeling existed that barriers were being broken, frontiers were being crossed and fresh territory mapped out for the very first time. At the heart of the new drama lay a foundation of Gay Pride, the simple assumption that Gay was Good.

More than dramatic content needed to be changed; the new wine could not simply be poured into old bottles. The most important

structural innovation of the 1970s was the emergence of the first gay theatre groups. Some became a permanent part of the alternative theatre circuit; many more came together for only one or two performances; others were ad-hoc groupings staging semi-spontaneous street theatre at demonstrations and rallies. All raised issues of interest to gay people and tailored their work specifically for a gay audience.

Every theatrical revolution baulks against a stagnant status quo, and the homosexual plays of the 1950s and 1960s inspired the scorn of the new gay writers and performers. The stereotyping of the 1960s was particularly condemned and held responsible for spreading negative images of homosexual people. The new gay drama wanted to shatter these stereotypes by creating characters who were neither androgynous nor tragic. In political work, this led to the emergence of a different, positive stereotype: the radical, out-of-the-closet, politicised lesbian/gay man. More naturalistic work portrayed 'ordinary', unexceptional homosexuals in a matter-of-fact way.

Gay drama evolved in two broad directions, reflecting the two strands of the gay movement. Some groups made themselves part of the political fringe theatre that sprang up in Britain during the 1970s, touring the alternative circuit of halls, factories and arts centres. This strand of gay drama actively sought links with mainstream socialism and often explored the relationship between Gay Liberation and left-wing politics.

The second strand was less formal and often shaded into areas beyond 'legitimate' theatre: cabaret, drag show, street theatre, happening. It was frequently anarchic and unpredictable, a

transvestite theatre using parody and imagism in an effort to startle and shock. This type of gay theatre reacted against stereotyping in a different way. Instead of debunking homosexual stereotypes, it exaggerated them to ridiculous lengths, creating characters of gross androgyny who mocked the very idea of normality.

The Stonewall riots did not emerge ex nihilo, and the new gay theatre also had its dramatic precursors. These were isolated figures in the 1950s and 1960s who did not follow the unwritten rules of their age. They were open about their sexuality; they did not mention homosexuality in low tones of tragic foreboding; they refused to draw predictable dykes and queens. Their work lacked the conscious politicisation of the generation who followed because homosexual behaviour was not yet conceptualised within a political framework. Their rebellion was an individualistic one, but in attitude they looked forward to the militancy of GLF. Before studying the gay drama of the 1970s, then, it is worth looking briefly at these precursors. Their refusal to place homosexuality in a medical/psychological framework points the way to the future, and the politicised generation who followed them owed a great deal to these writers' individual revolts.

7. PRECURSORS OF THE SEVENTIES

The four playwrights in this chapter were writing before the heady days of Gay Liberation and yet they demonstrate the pride and confidence that inspired gay people in the 1970s. The work of Joe Orton, Brendan Behan, Jean Genet and John Herbert is distinguished by a boldness and realism not found in the work of their contemporaries.

Joe Orton refused to hide his homosexuality, or feel any shame about it. In his diaries,[1] he describes his casual sexual encounters with obvious relish and displays deep scorn for the puritanical streak in Anglo-Saxon culture. Unlike most writers of the 1960s, he did not see homosexuality as an affliction; consequently, there are no tragic, guilt-laden victims among his characters.

Orton declared that his intention in Entertaining Mr Sloane (1964) was to 'break down all the sexual compartments'.[2] He is careful to establish that the homosexual character is not a screaming queen, for Ed has a dominant personality, is interested in sports and loathes the 'feminine' pursuits that were assumed to delight male homosexuals. Ed is not a sad victim, but a sexual predator, as devoid of morality as his vampiric sister, Kath. 'I wanted him played as if he was the most ordinary man in the world, and not as if the moment you wanted sex with boys, you had to put on earrings and scent',[3] Orton wrote to Peggy Ramsay. He was very disappointed when he saw the play near the end of its run and

found that the sexual compartments had re-emerged.

As Orton discovered, stereotypes satisfy a deep emotional need. They reduce the unknown to fixed limits and make it safe. Therefore, people want to believe in them and tend to block out evidence that contradicts them. Comic actors are attracted to stereotyped figures because the gestures and mannerisms associated with them provide a concrete aid around which the actor can build up a part. Audiences often respond warmly to a stereotyped performance, feeling reassured by the familiar figures on stage. For all these reasons, stage performances frequently become stereotyped, even when (as in Orton's case) this runs counter to the author's expressed wishes.

The general public's concept of the male homosexual has been dominated by two stereotypes during this century, the screaming queen and the dirty old man. Orton was careful not to let Ed fall into the former category, but could not prevent him drifting into the latter. The figure of the dirty old man dates back to the days when homosexuality was viewed as a vice rather than an illness; Ed's lecherous designs on Sloane's boyish body enabled audiences to slot him into the category of woman-hating seducer of youth, the dirty old man whose pleasure is the corruption of innocence.

Orton tried a different way of breaking down sexual compartments in Loot (1967) by making Hal bisexual: 'Even the sex you were born into isn't safe from your marauding'.[4] Once again, though, Orton created a character capable of being slotted into a different pigeonhole: the sex-crazed male. Homosexual behaviour is linked with a general promiscuity, as if it results from an excess of lust, a point of view as old as the Christian church. Orton certainly

did not intend to condemn Hal's free-ranging sexual behaviour, but audiences brought their prejudices to the theatre and often took away impressions never meant by the author. Hal's homosexuality ended up a kind of sexual extravagance with no emotional significance.

In his last play before his death, Orton attacked conventional opinion more directly, using words as a rapier to puncture orthodox morality. A manic farce with a plot revolving around confusion of gender, What The Butler Saw (1969) takes numerous well-aimed swipes at sexual puritanism. The play mocks sexual taboo with devil-may-care abandon: 'Try a boy for a change. You're a rich man. You can afford the luxuries of life.'.[5] Two subjects which conventional morality approaches with immense gravity - homosexuality and prostitution - are here made the material for quick, light-hearted humour.

The concept of sexual normality is ridiculed repeatedly. Normality is a joke, for underneath the semblance of respectability lurks all manner of so-called perversion: 'Marriage excuses no-one the freaks' roll-call'.[6] Nor should anyone assume that heterosexuality is a guarantee of normal masculinity, even though it is frequently viewed as such:

> PRENTICE: Many men imagine that a preference for women, is ipso facto, a proof of virility.
> RANCE: Someone should really write a book on these folk-myths.[7]

Sexuality is more complex, diverse and idiosyncratic than conventional opinion would have us believe. Similarly, gender-roles are not universal archetypes, unchanging through the centuries,

but artificial conventions that vary according to custom and taste. 'Have you taken up transvestism? I'd no idea our marriage teetered on the edge of fashion.'[8], Mrs Prentice asks her husband, and cross-dressing suddenly seems as unexceptional as eating or drinking. Geraldine gets her head shaved and is mistaken for a boy, Nick puts on a dress and masquerades as a girl. By the end of the play, chaos is triumphant: normality has lost all meaning, traditional gender-roles lie in tatters and society's sexual taboos have been shattered by the release of laughter.

Orton's carefree attitude to homosexuality contrasts sharply with his timorous contemporaries. In Entertaining Mr Sloane, he tried to depict homosexuality as an everyday thing, but he could not prevent audiences from viewing Ed in a stereotyped way. By the time he wrote What The Butler Saw, Orton had abandoned his attempt to depict the everyday. Sexual normality has become a joke; only the extraordinary is ordinary. Orton's work liberates through a joyful cynicism which pokes fun at our pretensions and debunks sexual myths in a bout of loud laughter. Puritanical guilt is replaced by an open-minded humour which accepts sexual variety and refuses to compartmentalise according to sexuality or gender. Orton's vision of humanity is as unrelenting as that of Hobbes, but his work is saved from bleakness by his enormous sense of fun. Had he lived to see the mid-seventies, I feel certain Orton would have found its political gay theatre rather dull and worthy.[9] Nevertheless, in his total rejection of shame and guilt, he anticipates the performers who are to emerge in the following decade.

The screaming queen is often a figure of pity; her sister, the outrageous queen, is most certainly not. Draped in her furs and finery, dripping with sequins, ostentatiously advertising her difference from the mass of humanity, the outrageous queen challenges fixed ideas about sexual identity through her appearance and mannerisms alone. While the screaming queen is sad and apologetic, the outrageous queen is aggressively self-confident.

Brendan Behan depicted the outrageous queen in all her glory as early as 1958 in his play, The Hostage. Princess Grace and Rio Rita, a pair of tranvestite homosexuals, enjoy their extravagant effeminacy and show no signs of shame or self-deprecation. The lyrics of a song they perform capture their carefree attitude:

> From Swedes so tall to Arabs small
> They answer with a leer
> We're here because we're queer
> Because we're queer because we're here.[10]

Compared with the timid, neurotic characters who followed in the 1960s, these are uncompromising creations. Princess Grace and Rio Rita are not effeminate because they lack some sort of biological Essence of Man, or because they cannot behave in an acceptably 'masculine' fashion, but because they choose to be the kind of people they are. They enjoy life on the edges of respectable society and show every sign of being happy with their lot.

In the heyday of GLF, the outrageous queen will be eulogised as a pioneer in the vanguard of sexual politics, shattering gender expectations through her revolutionary personal behaviour. Behan's play makes no such political connection; Grace and Rita are essentially there for comic effect, to make the audience laugh. This underlines that homosexual behaviour was not seen as having a political dimension in 1958; (Behan was hardly averse to political

content, since his play is about the politics of the I.R.A.). However, Grace and Rita strike a blow for their fellow homosexuals by their audacity, vitality and joy. As characters they are unsurpassed for sheer joie de vivre, even after thirty years of limp wrists and sequinned frocks.

Jean Genet is one playwright vital to the development of gay drama, even though he never wrote a play which might be listed as such. While Genet's novels - Querelle of Brest, The Thief"s Journal, Our Lady Of The Flowers - are explicitly homosexual in content, his plays make no direct reference to the subject. Apart from the homo-erotic atmosphere that pervades his first play, Deathwatch, Genet's stage work never portrays his homosexual experience.

Nevertheless, his work anticipates the politics of Gay Liberation. Genet delights in dramatising the illegitimate underbelly of society, with its whores, queers and thieves, and sides with this collection of misfits against the pious and respectable. He recognises the importance of symbols in human life and the significance of social roles in human discourse. For instance, The Thief's Journal describes how he chose to become a homosexual and a thief once he had been branded with these labels as a child. This refusal to see his homosexuality as a biological constant, fixed at birth, set Genet apart from others of his generation. His conceptualisation of homosexuality as a free choice made in a social context rather than a form of behaviour determined by birth or early upbringing comes close to theories later expounded by people like Foucault and Weeks.

Genet's work was also influential on a technical level. His

keen awareness of the arbitrary reality of social roles - even those based on definite biological differences - led him towards several stylistic innovations (or re-discoveries). The Maids calls for its three female parts to be played by male actors; The Balcony is a hall of mirrors in which the audience witnesses an actor pretending to be a customer at a brothel pretending to be a judge; the colonial figures in The Blacks should be played by black actors in white masks. Costume is the determining factor in Genet's dramatic characterisation; his characters are literally what they appear to be. This relationship between essence and appearance is something that will be deeply explored by gay drama in the 1970s, particularly in the Theatre of the Ridiculous and the work of Michel Tremblay.

Most importantly, Genet is on the side of his rebels and misfits. He makes no attempt to achieve a documentary detachment, or to 'understand' them; they are simply a group of people who lack political power. Nor is morality particularly relevant to his way of looking at society. Homosexuals, blacks and whores are no better and no worse than heterosexuals, whites and virgins; they are opposites which exist only in relation to each other. One group usurps power and respectability and its opposite automatically becomes relegated to powerlessness and illegitimacy. Thus, Genet's genius instinctively traces the battle-lines later drawn up by the movements of Black Power, Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation. However, he offers no solution to the struggle. The maids fail in their attempt to poison Madame; the revolution is still-born in The Balcony; the blacks enact merely a ritualistic slaughter of their white oppressors. Genet's work may anticipate many of the

arguments which become central to the theatre of Gay Liberation, but his vision is far more pessimistic. Glorying in the illegitimacy of the role of homosexual, he seems unable to look beyond this subservience and implies that any political attempt to transcend it is futile.

Homosexuals in 1960s drama were sad victims who accepted society's low estimation of themselves, creatures torn apart by guilt and self-loathing. By concentrating on the psychology of their unhappy characters, authors effectively ignored the social pressures which shaped their lives. In the process two discrete factors became confused: the misery caused by internal psychological maladjustment, and that created by society's intolerance and institutionalised prejudice.

John Herbert took a wider perspective in his play, Fortune And Men's Eyes (1967), treating homosexual misery as a social injustice rather than a personal problem. The play is set in a Canadian reformatory housing young offenders guilty of fairly trivial crimes. Homosexual behaviour is very common in this claustrophobic, all-male establishment, but this does not result in an atmosphere of tolerance. On the contrary, inmates who are tarred with the label of homosexual are subjected to vicious mental and physical cruelty.

All homosexual contact inside the prison is strictly carnal, with a rigidly-enforced taboo preventing any gentle friendship from developing. Gang rape is a fairly common occurence. Mona has already undergone this ordeal in the storeroom, and the new boy, Smitty, is advised to place himself under the wing of one of the other prisoners to prevent the same thing from happening to

him. Homosexual contact is an expression of power and submission, having little to do with either love or sexual passion.

Although they take part in homosexual behaviour, the hard nuts of the reformatory do not consider themselves to be homosexual. Rocky delights in telling a story of how he fleeced a rich young 'fruit' for all he was worth and uses derisive language - homo, fruit, fag - to describe his unfortunate victim. Smitty soon learns to revise the definition of homosexual he has learnt in the outside world; inside the jail, it is possible to have sex in the showers and still not classify as 'queer'.

But for the unlucky few who are classified in this way, life in the prison is a form of hell. A strict hierarchy operates within the jail and the lowest caste of all is homosexual. Mona has been branded in this way for three reasons: he is in jail for a sex offence and lives a gay lifestyle outside the prison; he refuses to protect himself by accepting a role as someone's 'buddy'; he has a gentle nature and aspires to culture and art. In the reformatory, homosexual is less a definition of sexual identity than a place in the pecking order - the most lowly place of all, a state of utter powerlessness.

Smitty and Mona, both rather innocent figures in this harsh world, gradually become friendly to the point where Smitty makes a pass at Mona. However, Mona rejects the pass, telling Smitty that 'it's not in your nature'," and explaining how he has had to learn to 'separate' in order to survive in the prison. Mona has a dream life which protects him from the reality of the penitentiary and enables him to cope with being a passive sexual vessel for half the prison's inmates; sex with Smitty would shatter that distinction. Mona would then be made truly vulnerable, especially

once Smitty's feelings for him changed into contempt, affection not being allowed within the confines of the prison walls.

Smitty's initial reaction is anger, and his homophobia comes out when he calls Mona a 'filthy fairy'[12] and a 'cocksucker'.[13] But this anger passes once Mona's explanation begins to make sense to him, and for a brief moment the two young men achieve the kind of warm contact which is almost impossible in the prison. At this point, their cellmates, Rocky and Queenie, rush in and start a fight. When the guards break up the scuffle and demand an explanation, Queenie and Rocky claim that they caught Mona making a pass at Smitty. A convenient victim found, the guards drag Mona to the 'kitchen' where he will be beaten and whipped. They hate homosexuals as much as the prisoners do (one of them calls Mona a 'little pansy')[14] and take every opportunity to prove their own heterosexuality by punishing homosexual 'offenders'. This punishment serves a dual purpose: it acts as a psychological safety-valve for the guards, and prevents any deep, trusting (and potentially subversive) relationships between the inmates.[15] The play ends with Smitty alone on stage, brutalised by a brutal system, vowing to revenge himself on everyone.

Fortune and Men's Eyes uses the tough world of a prison for young male offenders as a metaphor for society in general. As in the reformatory, men are not allowed to make gentle contact with each other and homophobia is whipped up to maintain these emotional barriers. It is not sexual contact between men that is feared and hated - in the prison, this is a common occurrence - but love and trust. Sex is made into an instrument of power, an assertion of dominance; love is far more dangerous because of the vulnerability

it engenders.

Mona is certainly the hero of the play. His softness, vulnerability and emotional honesty make him a fuller human being than the stunted tough guys around him. Cast in the role of victim, he has carved out a method of survival and refuses to be ground down by the callous world in which he lives. His quiet pride sustains him through an unhappy life and he manages to retain a gentleness which men need to discover if they are not to become unfeeling automata like Rocky and Queenie.

Fortune and Men's Eyes may be somewhat melodramatic, but at least the play avoids the worst of the psychological nonsense of the 1960s. Herbert offers no explanation for Mona's gayness and he refrains from making Smitty into the cliché of the latent homosexual. Sexuality is placed in a social context, not treated as if it emerges effortlessly during adolescence in a form fixed for life. Mona is a victim, but he is not a sad figure whom the audience can patronise from a position of superiority; his gentleness is to be admired rather than pitied. And although Fortune and Men"s Eyes contains the usual stream of camp jokes, its humour has a cutting edge lacking in other drama of the period.

Herbert never delivers polemic and yet the message of his play is crystal-clear. Most obviously, it demonstrates the folly of punishing homosexual behaviour by placing offenders in an all-male prison environment. Its wider message is that homophobia is the real problem, not homosexual love. Like many post-war American plays, it places traditional masculinity under the microscope and finds it sadly wanting.

Orton, Behan, Genet and Herbert make a diverse group of writers, but they did share a common factor: prison. Genet spent many of his formative years in penitentiaries; Behan describes his adolescence behind bars in Borstal Boy; Orton was sent to prison for defacing library books; Fortune and Men's Eyes is set in a male reformatory.

Knowledge of life inside prison gave all four writers an added insight into homosexual behaviour, enabling them to reject the physiological, hormonal and psychological theories of the time. They could not accept the myth that people were either homosexual or heterosexual when they saw that homosexual behaviour became so universal behind bars, even amongst people who were completely heterosexual out of jail. Equally, they realised that the linking of male homosexuality with effeminacy did not always apply, for they saw all types of people engaging in homosexual acts. Experience of prison life was bound to make an intelligent person question the myths surrounding homosexuality.

Unfortunately, such an experience was always likely for homosexual men in the post-war period. A few individuals responded to incarceration with a radical re-assessment of their thinking on homosexuality. Instead of seeing it as a psychological illness or a moral failing, they began to edge their way towards a political analysis of sexual behaviour.

These embryonic ideas eventually blossomed into the politics of Gay Liberation. Similarly, the drama in this chapter anticipated the committed gay theatre of the 1970s, except that this early work was less consciously political. This was not due to any lack of interest in politics; Behan and Genet, especially, raised many

political issues in their work. It was rather that sexual behaviour was not seen as having any political dimension at this time. Even so, the four artists in this chapter sensed their way to a political position which would be theorised more rigorously by later artists and intellectuals. Their work represents the first tremors of an earthquake that shook the theatre in the 1970s.

8. GAY GROUPS AND POLITICAL GAY THEATRE

1969 formed a watershed in gay history. Before this date, homosexuals had been isolated individuals with no concept of themselves as a political class. Efforts to create change had been limited to discreet requests for legal reform. After the birth of Gay Liberation, a generation of angry women and men came to the fore demanding a completely new role for homosexuals in society.

This generation included a number of actors, writers and directors who carried their politics into the artistic field. Experimental British theatre in general entered a political phase in the 1970s, for most of the best writers of the period - Hare, Brenton, Bond, McGrath, Barker, Griffiths - were committed to producing a socialist theatre agitating for political change. In this politicised atmosphere, gay people also sought to exploit the political potential of the stage. Theatre had been used as a political weapon in the past, they argued, but one that their enemies controlled and exploited to spread negative, stereotyped ideas about homosexuality. The process had to be reversed, making the new theatre into a lever serving the cause of Gay Liberation.

The theory was simple; putting it into practice was more of a problem. No theatrical structure existed which would enable a gay drama to emerge. The established theatre - both the commercial playhouses of the West End and the subsidised giants - were at best indifferent to the idea of a positive gay drama, and often antagonistic. Not just a new type of drama had to emerge, but an

entire theatrical framework in which to perform it. Theatre groups therefore began to spring up whose members were exclusively gay.

However, this process did not occur in a planned fashion, for GLF recognised no hard and fast division between political activism and theatrical activity. Individuals frequently belonged to both worlds, which merged into one during the colourful carnival of street theatre. A group of people lacking the influential contacts of a successful pressure group used stark theatricality to draw attention to their cause. Their flamboyant product was eagerly consumed by a voracious mass media which normally reported events in a hostile manner; nevertheless, in the process GLF became visible to a mass audience.

Gay Liberation owed an enormous debt to other movements for the example they had set in this field. Women's Liberation had been particularly quick to spot the potential of 'guerilla theatre' to shock and publicise. At the Miss World finals in 1971, the Women's Street Theatre Group performed The Flashing Nipple Show, where actors dressed in dark clothes and attached flashing lights to their crotch and breasts in order to mock the sexual objectification of beauty contests. In the march to celebrate International Womens' Day, the group pushed a pram through the streets while a tape recorder loudly played Keep Young and Beautiful. At the rally which followed, they performed a play called Sugar and Spice which employed the bold, physical imagery of agit-prop theatre: a giant deodorant stick and sanitary towel, a massive red, white and blue penis.

Seeking publicity rather than critical acclaim, The Women's Street Theatre Group performed their work outside traditional theatre buildings. They held an auction on the tube, selling a dolly-bird, a female academic and a housewife to the highest bidders from the crowd. A small group pretended to shave in front of the mirrors in the women's toilet at Miss Selfridge's, Oxford Street. Their theatre purposely set out to challenge conventional opinion by using shock tactics. It was less an artistic product to be judged by aesthetic standards than an adjunct to the political rally and demonstration.

The Gay Street Theatre Group worked with the women's group to infiltrate a Christian Festival of Light meeting. 'Operation Rupert' was an organised attempt to reduce this meeting to chaos, a process which was known as 'zapping' in the revolutionary argot of the time. The gay group dressed in a variety of outrageous costumes: nuns, schoolgirls, policemen with false noses, Mary Whitehouse, a priest, 'The Spirit of Porn'. They argued with speakers and heckled them until the festival stewards forcibly removed their uninvited guests.

Following the lead of Women's Liberation, The Gay Street Theatre Group created an imagist theatre based on everyday objects, as, for example, in a show where they used raw liver and coat hangers to stage a mock back-street abortion. Theatre for the street could not be verbal, subtle, discursive or structurally complex; it had to make its point quickly and boldly.

The group organised other events which were even closer to the fringes of 'legitimate' theatre. They arranged a series of 'Gay Days', picnics in Central London parks, to which gay people

were invited en masse. A day in the sun became an event where an invisible minority went public; banners and sandwiches combined in a politics of pleasure. Similarly, the Gay Pride March, held each year to commemorate the Stonewall Riots, became a mobile theatrical happening where people dressed in flamboyant costumes and took to the streets.

Such anarchic energy tends to rapidly burn itself out unless it consolidates into more structured activity. Both the feminist and the gay street theatre groups soon developed into semi-permanent troupes, the former becoming The Punching Judies and the latter The Brixton Faeries. Based at a gay commune in Brixton, The Faeries still eschewed the performance hall for the street, often performing at political events which they themselves had helped to organise.

As a dramatic form, street theatre does not seem natural to the British genius. Culture, temperament and climate combine to make street theatre a somewhat exotic bloom for the naturalistic garden of British drama. The politics of British alternative theatre has tended to be socialist rather than anarchist, and performers have sought links with the Trade Union movement and organised socialism. It is not surprising, then, that political gay theatre in this country soon abandoned the streets for the factory floor and community hall. Gay activists began to align themselves with the broad Left and to attempt a synthesis of Marxism and sexual politics. This first happened in Bradford in a group called General Will.

A basic difference of ideology soon threatened the group. Sexual liberation was a central issue for members of GLF, an indispensable aspect of a successful revolution; the traditional

Left saw sexuality as a peripheral matter which would right itself after the revolution. General Will had hitherto been a Marxist group performing a cartoon-style theatre on economic issues, performing in student refectories and at trade union conferences. The influence of GLF created a very different type of play, All Het Up, for a theatre workshop in the spring of 1975. To a traditional Marxist, its concentration on emotional and sexual issues must have seemed unhealthily elitist.

A battle for the soul of General Will ensued, with the sexual liberationists finally gaining victory. The group produced plays for a further two years, including a lesbian piece called Lesbe Friends and a play dealing with a variety of controversial topics, including cottaging, child custody and the age of consent. Even then, General Will never became an exclusively gay group (for instance, they performed one of the first pieces of British black theatre, Me See It Gonna Blow, with an Asian and Caribbean cast). But the acrimonious struggle for power within the group had taken its toll and General Will's attempt to marry Marxism and sexual politics proved a short-lived experiment.

The spontaneity of street theatre and the simplicity of agit-prop was giving way to more complex art. Early street theatre had been reactive, the gay community's response to society's hostility. The personal act of coming out as gay had been inseparably linked with the public act of creating theatre; art, politics and self-help working together in easy harmony. But success created its own brake; as the gay scene expanded and gay people grew in self-confidence, the pressures to take political action became less acute.

Street theatre had begun to lose its shock value. A mass media which had gobbled up every theatrical tit-bit on offer suddenly seemed to lose interest. 'Gay Lib' and 'Women's Lib' had become old hat, and the popular press, in its ceaseless hunger for novel trivia, no longer found them newsworthy. Those who take a conspiratorial view of society might also argue that tactically it was more effective to ignore the new movement than to ridicule it.

Finance was a constant problem. The theatre on the streets was unwaged, performers often having to fund their own shows. The Arts Council were committed to sponsoring minority theatre at the time, but those who distributed the money rarely saw the artistic merits of rough-edged agit-prop. Funding was essential for any group hoping to become a permanent fixture, but many would not accept government money on ideological grounds or were not structured in the organised way that funding bodies demanded.

Agit-prop and street theatre have strict artistic and political limitations. Ideally suited to concrete issues and specific struggles (such as the battle against W.H. Smiths when they refused to stock Gay News) they lack the subtlety to deal with the complex blend of politics and subjective experience of everyday life. Once the initial euphoria of the new gay militancy had worn off, gay people started to want to raise contentious issues and explore conflicting emotions. If the fresh ideas of GLF were to be disseminated and discussed, this had to happen through a dramatic form capable of intricate argument. If the new subjective reality of being young and gay in the 1970s were to be expressed truthfully, a more subtle form of theatre needed to evolve. And

if gay theatre were to advance beyond inspired amateurism, permanent groups of skilled individuals in a tight, professional structure had to emerge. The time was ripe for the birth of Gay Sweatshop.

> You are looking at a screaming lesbian
> A raving Dyke
> A pervert, deviant
> Queer, fairy, fruitcake, freak[1]

The opening lines to Gay Sweatshop's first lesbian play, Any Woman Can, have the fire and immediacy of agit-prop. It is now difficult to imagine the shocked reaction they must have caused among theatre audiences conditioned to apologetic portrayals of unhappy homosexuals. The early scenes of Mister X, the first major show produced by the men in Gay Sweatshop, have the same challenging directness. Four actors kneel in a circle and 'mime masturbation with increasingly noisy pants and grunts'.[2] One character asks what homosexuals do; the replies avoid the decorous evasions audiences were accustomed to hearing:

> ONE: They molest children.
> TWO: They spread disease.
> THREE: They suck cocks![3]

Political agitation had come in from the streets and invaded the theatre. Both works prickle with the anger of Gay Liberation, throwing the derogatory terms used to label homosexuals defiantly back at a hostile society. A new type of homosexual theatre had burst onto the scene.

Gay Sweatshop formed the vanguard of this theatrical movement and were by far the most important group to emerge from gay activism

in Britain. They were born out of a lunch-time experiment at Ed Berman's Almost Free Theatre in 1975, when a series of short plays of interest to gay people were staged.[4] This proved so successful that some of the artists involved banded together to form a permanent group. A national tour of their first show followed in the autumn.

Gay Sweatshop's earliest work bears the stamp of its political origins and yet it already marks the first step towards a new polished professionalism. The group eventually produced a highly sophisticated theatre, but their roots remained in the anger and pride of GLF. The ideals at the heart of their work can be seen at their purest in the relatively artless texts of Any Woman Can and Mister X.

Any Woman Can, by Jill Posener, traces the gradual evolution of a young woman named Ginny from a lonely schoolgirl into a radical lesbian feminist. The text, an impressionistic series of monologues and conversations, follows Ginny through early adulthood and her first lesbian relationships. These are generally brief and unsatisfying: a heated passion with an older schoolgirl; a guilty fling with a married woman; an intense friendship neither party allows to become sexual; lonely evenings waiting in a furtive lesbian club. Ginny begins to realise that her relationships have failed because lesbians are oppressed and also oppress themselves. Only honesty can offer a real chance of happiness, so she makes the decision to be open about her sexuality and to become a first contact for other lesbians less confident than herself.

Ginny served as a spokeswoman, not only for her author, but

for many of the women in the audience. Her struggle to accept her own homosexual feelings was an almost quintessential experience for young gay people in the 1970s. Many of the audience attending Posener's play would themselves be learning to gain confidence as gay people and they had finally found a theatre which gave them a dramatic voice. Unlike earlier drama, this was not a voyeuristic peep at an exotic species called the lesbian; it was a theatre by and for lesbians, which belonged to them.

Posener confirmed this when she wrote of the play in 1984: 'It was for homosexuals first and the rest of the world second.'[5] In order to highlight this fact, the actors had sat among the audience when not on stage, and Gay Sweatshop had decided on a policy of using lesbian performers only. The play was aimed at an audience composed of isolated, often uncertain, lesbians: 'for them it was vital that we didn't turn round and say "Sorry love, I'm just playing a part."'.[6]

Although more structured than the theatre of the streets, Any Woman Can remained in essence a piece of agit-prop drama. It made no attempt to be neutral and its message was unequivocal: lesbians and gay men should find the courage to come out and be counted. The first half of the play dramatises the problems and loneliness facing young lesbians, for which the final scene offers a solution. In four short monologues, three women give their reasons for colluding with society and accepting the status quo, whilst the fourth argues the case for radical opposition.

The first monologue comes from an older 'butch' lesbian who takes her 'femme' partner to the pub every Sunday. Their relationship is reminiscent of George and Childie, for they take

dominant/submissive roles based on the traditional heterosexual norm. The older woman does not even think of herself as lesbian - she seems to see herself as some sort of surrogate male - and cannot comprehend Ginny's need for a relationship between equals. She remains fixated in a world of butch and femme and her thinking cannot transcend the limits set by heterosexist standards.

The second lesbian to speak is a successful career-woman who conceals her lesbianism in order to safeguard her career. She meets other women like herself once a week at a lesbian club. Here she can enjoy the economic independence that her career brings, but only in a twilight world of secrecy and subterfuge. Nevertheless, her life is a fairly comfortable one, so staying in the closet seems a matter of common-sense: she sees no reason to upset the apple-cart.

The third woman has no such self-confidence. She is deeply ashamed of her lesbian feelings and would dearly love to be heterosexual ('normal ... accepted').[7] She views her lesbianism as a disease and begs the audience to pity and tolerate her. Too full of self-loathing to be honest with the world, she lives in constant terror of people discovering her guilty secret.

The fourth and final monologue comes from Ginny herself once she has become a lesbian feminist. Her confident speech undercuts the arguments advanced by the other three women and provides overpowering reasons why gay people should come out. As long as they stay hidden behind their masks of pretended normality, gay people must remain lonely and isolated; political strength can only come through collective action. Ginny gives an example to explain what she means: when she began to wear her badge, a woman

in the launderette had come up to her and confided that she was also lesbian. It was only because Ginny had gone public about her sexuality that this isolated lesbian had been able to make her first contact with other people like herself.

Any Woman Can was written for a lesbian audience and for two groups of people within that audience. The first were the lesbian activists who had graduated from self-doubt to political commitment, represented on stage by the figure of Ginny. The play affirmed the decision they had made and encouraged them to take further political activity. The second group were the lesbians who had not yet come over to this way of thinking, represented by the other three women. Any Woman Can sought to persuade these women that their inaction was a form of self-oppression and that they should find the courage to come out. Ginny understands their doubts and fears, but feels that progress can never be made as long as lesbians fearfully collude in their own oppression. The play's final speech mirrors the angry defiance of the opening lines:

> What those women have just said seems to make perfect sense - but how long can you keep up the pretence? And why should you? YOU ARE STILL LOOKING AT A SCREAMING LESBIAN AND I'M LOOKING RIGHT BACK AT YOU! [8]

Just as Any Woman Can traces the life-story of a young lesbian, Mister X, by Drew Griffiths and Roger Baker, follows a gay man's development from nervous schoolboy to angry activist. The progression is again typical, at least for a young gay man in the 1970s: pretending to be straight at school and work; passing long evenings in a 'piss-elegant' club called Dorian's; replying

to contact ads in Gay News; a whirlwind romance which cannot survive both partners' sense of self-disgust. Without doubt, these were experiences familiar to many of the audience.

As with Any Woman Can, Mister X is a call to arms, a piece of polemic designed to encourage members of the audience to come out of the closet. Its political message is delivered via a parody of a TV documentary about homosexuality. Mr X and a gay activist are questioned about their homosexuality in a studio interview; the gay activist appears in person, Mr X is shrouded in silhouette. Mr X is timid and apologetic and cites famous homosexuals from history in what is essentially a plea to be tolerated. In return, he promises, he will be discreet about his condition. Heavy with a sense of shame, he colludes with the interviewer who is keen to slot him into the role of medical victim or social problem.

However, the gay activist rejects these efforts at labelling him in heterosexist terms and confidently expresses his new-found pride:

> Mr X says the only way for homosexuals to live is aping heterosexual conduct and behaviour. I say we're gay and thank God for it - not for us sterile marriages and stereotypical role-playing. Mr X says let's be discreet and not rock the boat. I say let's rejoice in being gay and don't rock the boat, sink the bloody thing! [9]

There is no doubt about who wins the argument and Mr X eventually comes round to the activist's way of thinking. Near the beginning of the play, Mr X had confessed his homosexuality to a priest, who stripped him of his real name and baptised him Mr X. In the final scene, Mr X refuses to accept this anonymity and tears off the mask which the priest has imposed on him. The

actor playing Mr X steps out of his character and speaks directly to the audience, telling them his name and address plus the simple fact that he is gay. He is no longer willing to hide his sexuality:

> I had this huge sign inside my head which said 'Careless talk costs lives'. I'm taking that sign down now and I'm putting up another one which says 'I'm me. Who are you?'[10]

Any Woman Can and Mister X aimed to encourage, reason and cajole gay people out of the closet. Ginny and Mr X leave behind the loneliness and confusion of their adolescence when they find the courage to be open about their sexuality. However, the political content of both plays is far more general than in Gay Sweatshop's later work, and, although they argue loudly for gay liberation, neither play mentions socialism. Posener concludes this in an introduction she wrote to her play in 1984, saying that it 'was quite devoid of theoretical political content'.[11] This reflected the changes that took place within the members of Gay Sweatshop as the group evolved; the act of making gay theatre politicised the performers, who then refined their political beliefs through the process of dramatic creation.

The similarities between Any Woman Can and Mister X are striking, in terms of both style and content. In the early days of Gay Sweatshop, the overwhelming need was not for a theatre arguing the links between patriarchy, homophobia and capitalism, but for plays which reflected the new options available to gay women and men. A gay subculture had been slowly evolving in Britain following legalisation in 1967 and a generation of homosexual people had emerged who lived a new kind of lifestyle, either through campaigning groups like GLF and CHE, or through the pubs and night-

clubs which sprang up in most large towns. These people had no voice on the stage or in the mass media; they had to make do with parodies of themselves in 'serious' drama. Gay Sweatshop satisfied a need, and queues thronged to see their first performances, an audience of hungry, young people who longed to see themselves depicted realistically on stage.

Ginny and Mr X were the gay Everywoman and Everyman of the 1970s. Their efforts to overcome self-oppression, to avoid compromise and to fight for a new honesty, reflected the struggles of their young audience, an audience angry at its past and fired by the utopian ideals of GLF. If both texts now seem one-dimensional and cliched, they should always be viewed against the theatrical alternatives of the day. Ginny and Mr X may be ciphers, symbols of the new gay consciousness, but there was far more truth in them than in the 'rounded' characters of the problem play. This truthfulness was remarked on in reviews of the time. The reviewer from The Stage[12] used the word 'honest' three times in his small piece on Mister X and said of Jill Posener that 'her sincerity is beyond doubt'.[13]

Over the next five years, Gay Sweatshop's theatre developed a distinctive political character rooted in the emotions of gay pride. The group's political analysis rapidly became more sophisticated, though, as they took on board the sexual politics of a revitalised feminism. They became opposed to monogamy and the nuclear family, methods of structuring relationships which they viewed as products of society's capitalist superstructure. However, they rejected traditional Marxism, with its emphasis on

economic causes to the exclusion of all others, insisting on a human socialism which also gave weight to personal and emotional factors. Gay Liberation was not simply a matter of attaining civil rights for a minority, but had something of value to offer society in general: a completely fresh way of structuring sexuality and a transformation of the relationship between the two sexes.

Gay Sweatshop felt it essential to create a theatre by gay people for gay people, so they developed a policy of using only gay workers in the group. Since there were no scripts available which portrayed gay people in the way they wanted, they were forced to write their own, often opting for collective authorship. The male and female workers in the company tended to concentrate on productions specific to their gender, reflecting the group's realisation that the struggles facing lesbians and gay men were not identical.

Gay Sweatshop introduced a new style of acting into theatre about homosexuals, a Brechtian objectivity which generally portrayed the character instead of trying to become it. More importantly, they discarded existing stereotypes, using the figures of the screaming queen and the butch dyke for humorous or ironic purposes only. A desire to create positive images of gay women and men had been one of the central motivations behind the formation of a specifically gay theatre group, and consequently the new characters marked a radical departure from their predecessors.

Before Gay Liberation, homosexuality had been viewed as an individual problem belonging to the field of pathological psychology. Alan Pope, one of the group who staged Mister X, stresses the immense influence which a booklet called With Downcast Gays had

on the first Gay Sweatshop members. With Downcast Gays analysed the role that psychiatry had played in justifying the oppression of homosexuals and took a highly critical attitude towards contemporary psychoanalytical theory. The dramatists of the 1960s had raided this theory to create a theatre of exquisite psychological detail which lacked any social dimension. In contrast to this, Gay Sweatshop emphasised the need to look at gay people as a sociological and political class rather than as isolated individuals. Brechtian ideas were extremely influential on the British fringe in the early 1970s, and Gay Sweatshop's aims were ideally served by theatrical methods designed to focus on large, social developments.

As the decade progressed, the output of the group matured from the fiery simplicity of their earliest works into a polished product with a broad historical sweep. Gay Sweatshop stood between two worlds, serving the gay community by dramatising issues of interest to gay people, but also adding their unique voice to the flourishing socialist drama of the late 1970s.

As Time Goes By, by Noel Greig and Drew Griffiths, focuses on 20th century developments in gay history. The action takes place at three points over the last hundred years: England in 1896, following the Cleveland Street Scandal; Berlin during the rise of Nazism; and New York immediately before the Stonewall Riots. Each period is drawn in close detail, but the emphasis is on linking them to demonstrate the sweep of gay history.

In the London of 1896, rocked by the scandal of the Wilde trials, the homosexual subculture is a criminal underworld of prostitutes and clients. Reginald and Trevelyan, two upper-class

men, hire boys at a brothel run by Hammond. Homosexuality is illegal and socially ostracised, and 'When pleasure's against the law, it comes expensive.'.[14] Genuine affection occasionally blossoms in this set-up (for instance, an ex-prostitute describes a relationship with a client which developed into a romance) but most people prefer to avoid emotional attachments. Hammond dislikes them because they threaten his business. His clients dislike them because male prostitutes would then be 'throwing their legs up in the air ... for other young boys'.[15] And everyone is wary of the complications of romantic involvement in a world where homosexuality is loathed and discovery means ruin. Fear destroys most friendships, and self-hatred leaves the marks of internal scars. Reginald is deeply ashamed of his homosexuality, while Trevelyan protects himself with a veneer of flippant cynicism. Any alternative to this shameful existence is unimaginable.

However, Greig and Griffiths draw a contrasting picture of the period by setting a scene on Edward Carpenter's farm near Sheffield. It shows the poet and theorist, Carpenter, living happily with his boyfriend, both of them having overcome the sexual shame of their Victorian upbringing.

These contrasting strands of gay history reappear in the next period covered by the play: Berlin during the rise of Nazism. The clandestine brothel of London, 1896 has evolved into the seedy night-club of Berlin, 1929. An embryonic gay community now exists, but can survive only because of the protection afforded by Röhm. Once Röhm is murdered in The Night of the Long Knives, this fragile security is shattered and Berlin's homosexuals are rounded up by the Nazis. This section ends with a song which tries to rescue

these gay victims from the anonymity of the history books:

> A gas chamber and a pink triangle,
> That's how they slayed all of the gays.
>
> It was many years ago
> Still not many people know.
> Not once, but twice they died,
> Because their deaths have been denied.[6]

The remainder of the Berlin section of the play dramatises the efforts of Magnus Hirschfeld to legalise homosexuality in Germany. The personal salvation which Carpenter and his friends forged on an isolated farm has widened into a general movement under the leadership of Hirschfeld, who gets thousands of people to sign his petition for legalisation. This bold bid for equality attracts a monstrous response. The Nazis burn down Hirschfeld's Institute, destroy his books and use his petition to identify and round up homosexual people.

For the final part of the play, set in Christopher Street in New York, the seedy night-club has become a gay bar in the late 1960s. This attracts a wider range of people than its Berlin predecessor - Student, Drag Queen, Businessman, Leather Guy - but they all carry the scars of oppression. Each character stands isolated in his own lonely world, mouthing a monologue to himself. There is even a grim reminder of the Nazis in the shiny black costume of the Leather Guy.

However, the demand for change which began with Carpenter and grew with Hirschfeld is on the verge of becoming a mass movement. When a policeman arrests the Drag Queen for importuning, the customers of the bar suddenly become a united force and throw the policeman out. This action sparks off the Christopher Street riots,

leading eventually to the birth of the Gay Liberation Front. Carpenter and Hirschfeld have paved the way for mass dissent. The play is rounded off when the Drag Queen makes it clear that the Stonewall Riots will also become part of gay history: 'And our stories continue.'.[17]

As Time Goes By, with its broad, historical sweep, its Brechtian objectivity and its study of homosexual people as a class rather than as individuals sets out to correct popular history. As Richard Krupp said in his review of the play in Time Out, it 'depicts gay men continually caught up in history but alienated from it'.[18] Most text-books have no mention of homosexuality, or distort the truth through prejudice. One of the characters in the play spells it out:

> But already they're being re-written for us, these past years. What do you think people will remember in the future? Do you think it will be your work? Will they know what happened? Really happened? History is being re-shaped again. They'll know about the queer fascists; they'll know about Röhm and his cronies. But will they know that you lived, or that the men and women who came to you and opened themselves out to you existed? [19]

Gay activists argued that it was essential to retrieve history, correct these distortions and remove this bias. Denied a collective identity, homosexuals had been psychologically isolated from each other and kept ignorant of their own history. The conceptualisation of homosexuality as a psychiatric illness had prevented the emergence of a political analysis of the subject. As Time Goes By acts as a history lesson in dramatic form, giving gay audiences a glimpse of their own submerged past.

Nevertheless, retrieving history is only the starting point;

it then needs to be placed in a theoretical framework which explains the present and shapes the future. Gay activists felt they had to do more than show the past objectively; they also wanted to promote gay culture and lifestyles. They had to change the image of the homosexual from a figure of pity to a person of dignity and self-determination. The first gay heroes thus appeared on stage, characters who were meant to be respected and admired and to serve as models for gay people to follow.

In 1975, the prevailing images of gay people were those created by heterosexist culture: limp-wristed fairy, butch dyke, neurotic old queen. Following Gay Liberation, activists felt impelled to choose their own positive models in contrast to these. Unlike racial minorities, young gay people lacked the support of a native culture and were physically separated from their own 'descendants'. The new drama, therefore, concentrated on depicting positive characters who could serve as idealised role-models.

Noel Greig created this kind of figure in Edward Carpenter in Dear Love of Comrades (1979). Greig paints an idyllic portrait of life on Carpenter's farm near Sheffield, and shows Carpenter and his friends as brave, open and optimistic. The joy which Carpenter finds as a result of his courage and honesty is contrasted with the sorrow and cynicism of a gay author who stayed in the closet, E.M. Forster. Regretting his life, Forster mournfully says 'If only ... the world had allowed me to become an optimist, I might not have become a cynic.'.[20]

Dear Love of Comrades advocates a new sexual morality to replace traditional heterosexual values. Its characters are trying to put these ideals of non-monogamy into practice and to overcome the

sexual jealousy that often results from this. Clearly, Gay Sweatshop have moved a long way from Mister X; Dear Love of Comrades is a far more specific piece of work tailored for a politicised gay audience. The group had narrowed its base and was no longer trying to speak for such a diverse mix of gay people. This was partly because of the political views of its most influential members and partly a reaction to changes that were taking place within the gay movement. The expanded gay scene was fragmenting into a series of smaller groupings, and no single theatre group could try to represent gay people in all their variety.

Gay Sweatshop lost its monopoly as the voice of the new gay consciousness and became instead an acclaimed feature of the alternative touring circuit. Its work earned a reputation for artistic excellence, especially for its stagecraft. W. Stephen Gilbert had said in Plays and Players that he had 'no hesitation in proclaiming [As Time Goes By] a major play'.[21] Nicholas de Jongh had praised Nancy Diugiud's direction of Dear Love of Comrades as 'swift and lucid'[22] in The Guardian. The group may no longer have been considered as the representative voice of gay drama but its work had evolved so that it contained subtleties of argument which greatly enhanced its qualities as theatre.

Dear Love of Comrades is about Carpenter's socialism as much as his sexuality; indeed, the play implies that the two are indivisible. Leftist politics in general had moved towards Gay Sweatshop's position on sexism and gay rights. In their turn, Gay Sweatshop's politics had deepened from the generalised anger of their early work into a rational and humanistic variety of socialism.

Yet although Gay Sweatshop carved a niche for themselves in the socialist fringe theatre of the late 1970s, their primary commitment remained to gay people. They were wary of the dangers of professionalism and how this could create distance between performers and audience. The work produced by the women in the group, especially, tried to retain some of the early simplicity and directness, even if this risked a sacrifice in aesthetic standards.

The message behind I Like Me Like This was plainly spelled out in its title. The play followed the fortunes of a female rock group through an episodic mix of short scenes and rock songs, with performers doubling as actors and musicians. From a literary perspective, the text makes poor reading. The characters divide far too neatly into heroes and villains and the play has neither the political subtlety nor the structural inventiveness to overcome this lack of psychological depth. The lesbian characters are bland and homogenous, while the play's dramatic foil, a trendy young reporter who hounds the rock band around the country, is momentarily amusing, but soon becomes irritatingly silly. The two main issues of the play are the struggles women face in their relationships with men and the difficulties of trying to put the ideal of open, non-exclusive relationships into practice. In truth, though, there is little sense of these subjects being explored, for the outcome is never in doubt. Conclusions have already been reached and the text mechanically draws to its pre-determined close.

However, this literary analysis of the play misses the point, for in performance it creates a mood of warmth and friendliness between stage and auditorium. Audience and performers become a

united group of gay people collectively celebrating their sexuality. Both I Like Me Like This and Dear Love of Comrades are essentially morality plays reaffirming the lifestyle and convictions of their audience. The characters who follow the correct ideology in their daily lives reap the greatest reward and find the most happiness. Each performance confirmed the beliefs and practices of the new gay community, reflecting its standards, values, culture, hopes and fears.

Gay Sweatshop's work may seem rather insular unless placed in a historical context. This was theatre by and for a small group of people: young gay women and men of the post-Stonewall era. However, these dramatic characters in control of their own lives, for whom the audience were meant to feel warmth and respect, marked a crucial step forward. Sweatshop's plays may have spoken to a relatively narrow slice of the population but they were the first to portray happy, fulfilled homosexuals.

Sadly, drama is rarely at its best when showing happy, fulfilled characters. These characters can always fight a hostile world, but there begins the descent into melodrama. Gay Sweatshop's work in the 1970s often fails to stand up to close literary scrutiny. It was essentially community theatre (serving a psychological rather than a geographical community) and should be critically analysed in this light. The group's greatest innovation came in an attitude they took towards their gay characters, according them respect rather than sympathy in their struggles against the world.

Care and Control was intentionally conceived as a piece of community theatre, for it was written in response to discussions with audiences. Through these discussions, the group realised

that many women wanted them to create a play about the problems facing lesbian mothers in custody cases. Two mothers offered their experiences to the group as raw material and, after a period of research and improvisation, an author was called in to tighten the structure of the finished product. This underlines the importance the group attached to the idea of serving the gay community. Gay theatre had to speak directly to gay people on issues they wanted to hear about and which were not discussed elsewhere in the media.

Michelene Wandor's final text of Care and Control interweaves three strands of plot. Sue and Carol are lesbian lovers; both have been married. Sue has acceded her husband care and control of their son but finds that this arrangement hands her husband a great deal of power over her access to him. Carol now faces a similar battle in court over custody of her child. The second strand of plot follows Elizabeth, whose husband has applied for custody of their son after discovering that one of Elizabeth's friends is a lesbian feminist. The third couple are heterosexual, but Sara still loses custody of her daughter when Stephen leaves her for another woman.

Care and Control demonstrates the inequity of British laws relating to child custody. Women in general, and lesbians in particular, are discriminated against in court. Sara and Sue lose their legal battles: Sara's daughter is sent to live with her father and his wife, and Sue's husband is awarded care and control of their son which means that he can limit Sue's access to him. The second act dramatises two of the court cases in greater detail, the action cutting cinematically between the two courtrooms. At

the very end of the play, the verdicts are announced. Elizabeth's husband's smear campaign has proved successful and he is awarded custody of their son because 'If he continues to live with his mother, he is likely to live in a hothouse atmosphere of feminist fanaticism.'.[23] Carol is luckier in that she wins custody of her child, but the male judge makes it clear that he is not making a judgement on homosexual parents and his verdict 'rests on the narrow grounds of brick and mortar and nothing else.'.[24] Furthermore, it is on condition that Carol and Sue keep their relationship as private as possible, occupy separate bedrooms and are careful not to display affection in front of the child.

Although created with a gay audience in mind, Care and Control was relevant to a wider range of women. By showing three different sets of circumstances covering all forms of sexuality - gay, straight and bi-sexual - Care and Control points out that society oppresses women even in that area which has been designated their natural role: the care and raising of children. When women step out of line and threaten to live a life independent of men, through either feminism or lesbianism, they are punished by a male-dominated legal system. Even refusing to accept marriage is a punishable offence, as Sara discovers when Stephen walks out on her, finds another woman and yet still gains custody of their daughter.

Briefly summarised, the distinguishing features of Gay Sweatshop's theatre were:

> an awareness of the political significance of sexuality, including homosexuality, and of the links between Gay Liberation, feminism and socialism

a determination to depict gay people positively, to reject stereotyping and to create a new form of characterisation based on dignity and respect

an aim to become an authentic voice for gay people, raising issues of importance to them in a realistic and truthful manner

a policy to reach as many gay people as possible, particularly those isolated in small towns, through the practice of nationwide touring

a desire to encourage gay people to come out and be proud of their sexuality

a belief in a new sexual morality based on non-exclusive relationships and to the creation of a drama which explored the ideas and feelings growing out of this

a commitment to treating the sexes equally, or sometimes to prioritising issues relating to women as a corrective to existing sexism

The formation of all-gay theatre groups was an inevitable product of a mood of politicisation which followed GLF. Unless gay artists took control of all aspects of production from writing to final performance, bias and distortion seemed unavoidable. Gay

Sweatshop were the most accomplished and durable of these all-gay groups, producing work of high quality throughout the 1970s. The outlook appeared bleak when Gay Sweatshop broke up in 1980, but a new London-based group emerged at roughly the same time called Consenting Adults in Public.[25] The group listed their objectives in a leaflet:

> 1) to express the richness & variety of gay life in our work onstage, truthfully & from within
>
> 2) to reach as many different points within the gay community as possible
>
> 3) to increase gay awareness & consciousness, & to build bridges within this fragmented network
>
> 4) to make straight audiences aware of gay issues & gay culture
>
> 5) to provide an outlet for new gay writing
>
> 6) to encourage other gay performers
>
> 7) to encourage gays to work together to express their creativity through workshops.[26]

This sums up the aims of all-gay theatre groups with admirable succinctness. Gay Sweatshop might well have written the same leaflet, and yet the two groups produced work which contrasted strongly in both content and style. Gay Sweatshop and Consenting Adults in Public shared a desire to create a positive gay drama speaking for a new generation; their common roots lay in the radicalism of GLF. Yet significant differences in emphasis were possible under the umbrella of this broad consensus, as a comparison between the two groups shows.

Consenting Adults made a virtue of their lack of experience. Artistic excellence was less important to them than creating a

space where ordinary gays could express themselves dramatically. Weekly workshop sessions, open to all gay people irrespective of training or talent, formed an essential part of their work. These were not related to the group's productions, although individuals often 'progressed' from taking part in workshops to performing in front of an audience. The workshops aimed rather to help gay people explore their feelings through dramatic improvisation, to increase their self-confidence and to make them aware of the political aspects of their sexuality ('consciousness-raising'). In brief, their primary function was social rather than artistic.

The group were firmly rooted in London's gay community. They rejected the traditional fringe circuit of arts centres and studio theatres in favour of pubs, clubs, halls, universities, the street, even Hampstead Heath! Their shows therefore tended to have a rough edge and were unfavourably compared with those of Gay Sweatshop on account of this. Consenting Adults' organiser, Eric Presland, explained that the group created two different styles of theatre: scripted plays staged in traditional venues, and rougher shows tailored for the street.

Physically and emotionally centred in London, Consenting Adults toured far less than Gay Sweatshop. They took <u>The Madness of Lady Bright</u> to the Edinburgh Fringe in 1981, and occasionally visited university Gaysocs, but the bulk of their performances happened in London. Also, in spite of a stated aim to 'make straight audiences aware of gay issues and gay culture'[27], their work in practice assumed a gay audience. Texts of their shows do not suggest a theatre with one eye on the heterosexual spectator, anxious not to fuel his or her prejudices.

Consenting Adults created several shows on specific issues, such as two didactic works against the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill,[28] so they certainly did not lack political purpose. Yet their political position was less clear than that of Gay Sweatshop and their links with organised socialism extremely tenuous. This gave them a greater flexibility, for they were often prepared to tackle work (like The Madness of Lady Bright) which Gay Sweatshop would have rejected on political grounds.

Creating theatre which served and sprang out of London's gay community, Consenting Adults were able to raise controversial topics without fear of spreading prejudice. They were the first British group to stage a play on AIDS (Louise Kelley's Anti-Bodies) in a period when the subject was barely mentioned outside the gay press. Their texts gave less impression of being twisted for the sake of a correct political solution than those of Gay Sweatshop and their characters were more likely to be flawed, credible human beings. A continually changing membership created a constant flow of new ideas, giving Consenting Adults a breadth of outlook and flexibility of approach.

However, flexibility can degenerate into opportunism, and Consenting Adults' work seemed to lack a firm nucleus of ideas to give it coherence. Essentially defensive, it reacted to attacks and threats from outside and offered little in the way of positive solutions. In this, perhaps, the group reflected its origins in the gay movement, which has generally needed the external irritant of a Mary Whitehouse or an Anita Bryant[29] to unite its diverse membership. Gay Sweatshop's political austerity, on the other hand, acted as a focus for their art, ensuring that a strong sense

of purpose guided all their work.

This political difference manifested itself artistically. Gay Sweatshop's theatre evolved into a political objectivity, epitomised by the broad historical sweep of As Time Goes By. Artistic excellence was sought as a way of winning critical respect, although the group remained mindful of the drawbacks of professionalism. Stylistically, they tended to structure shows out of a succession of short scenes, often interspersed with songs. Consenting Adults in Public were far more eclectic. They used naturalism in Anti-Bodies; cabaret and agit-prop in It's An Unfair Cop, Guv and The Law Strikes Back; parody in Tea-Trolley and Lord Audley's Secret; discursive Shavianism in Latecomer.

This reflected the versatility of Eric Presland, the driving force behind Consenting Adults. Lacking the ability of Noel Greig or Michelene Wandor to juxtapose scenes in order to create thematic complexity, he outstrips them both for wit and verbal pyrotechnics, having a particular talent (and penchant) for parody and pastiche. Lord Audley's Secret is a mock Victorian melodrama; Tea-Trolley (or A Midsummer Night's Scream) is a pastiche of Elizabethan drama; Latecomer debates ideas with Shavian relish.

Unfortunately, the amateurism of some of the group's productions probably reflected a laziness in Presland and an impatience with detail. This meant that the quality of text used frequently did not get given justice in performance and earned Consenting Adults much criticism and many stinking reviews. Presland is perhaps too suspicious of professionalism; quality of performance is one way of forcing people to take notice of one's work, as Gay Sweatshop clearly proved.

Consenting Adults realised their aim of being a gay community group, if 'gay community' is taken to mean the visible surface of London's gay scene. They served this community through their workshop sessions and aimed to perform a piece of cabaret for every gay march and demonstration, including a show for Gay Pride Week each year. On Midsummer's Day, they staged a Midnight Matinee on Hampstead Heath. Their timetable followed the important dates in the gay movement's calendar and their shows dramatised issues of importance to London's gay population.

It could be argued that this amounted to 'ghettoisation'. Presland himself is aware of the danger and stresses that the group produced their traditional work outside of gay venues as some sort of corrective. But the raison d'être of community theatre is to produce theatre for a specific constituency and the needs of its members must remain paramount. Any successful community theatre becomes, ipso facto, a ghetto of sorts; forms as dissimilar as Restoration Comedy and Performance Art could arguably be termed 'ghetto theatre' once one accepts the fiction that there are universal theatrical forms which are not bound by the social system in which they occur. Consenting Adults in Public knew their market, tailored their work to suit it and should not have to apologise for the fact.

A more subtle argument might suggest that Consenting Adults did not represent the gay community, but one tiny section of gay life. So far in this chapter, the term 'gay community' has been used unproblematically, as if it were a definite entity which can be isolated with certainty. In fact, it could be argued that the 'gay community' and 'gay culture' do not exist, and that, although

there is a 'gay' lifestyle available to people in big cities, the idea of a class based on sexual orientation is a chimera. Gay people are not localised in the same way as most minorities. Gay men pursue many different lifestyles, from the casual cruising of leather bars to the quiet anonymity of monogamous relationships in suburbia. The cultural differences between the gay and lesbian communities are huge, particularly in London, where the sheer size of the city has enabled the two groups to evolve in relative isolation. The community which Consenting Adults represented is therefore a minority within a minority. Despite their artistic versatility, Consenting Adults' base was in many ways narrower than Gay Sweatshop's, for they rarely left the bed-sits of modern London gay life.

This begs the question whether any group could represent modern gay experience in its variety and richness. The flourishing gay scene and the success of the gay movement over the past fifteen years has caused a fragmentation of gay culture. Previous decades had seen some uniformity in homosexual experience. Prior to legalisation in 1967, homosexual men had little choice other than the dangers of a furtive, insular underworld or a hollow marriage made bearable by casual contacts in the local toilet. As Any Woman Can and Mister X make clear, the 1970s saw the struggle to create the present gay scene, the fight to come to terms with one's sexuality and often the momentous step out of the closet. The 1980s offer all these possibilities and more: everything from a totally gay life in an all-gay environment in a modern metropolis to a time-honoured mixture of wedding bells and public toilets. The

search for a quintessential gay experience may always have been misguided; it has now clearly become impossible.

Working with all-gay theatre groups offers many advantages. Gay groups can control the messages put across in their work and try to counteract the false impressions of the mass media. They can respond to issues as they arise and build up a special rapport with a regular audience. They are free to choose or reject plays as they wish and do not have to stage any text they consider hostile towards homosexuality. Furthermore, they can serve a social function for their members in much the same way as a local amateur group, fostering a supportive atmosphere where gay people can relax and feel at ease with themselves. These advantages still apply now, but were doubly important ten to fifteen years ago.

Yet gay groups tend to be ephemeral phenomena. With the exception of Gay Sweatshop and Consenting Adults in Public, they blossom only to fade after one or two performances. Clearly, forces also operate in the opposite direction, pulling gay groups apart. External problems and internal conflicts face any set of gay people who join together to form a theatre group.

The first problem is finding a group of actors, writers, directors and technicians who are willing to be identified as openly gay. Equally pressing is the need to draw a large enough audience. Since gay people do not congregate geographically in the same way as most ethnic minorities (although London acts as a magnet attracting people from the provinces) the potential audience is large but widespread. The solution is to tour, as Gay Sweatshop have always done. However, touring imposes artistic limitations:

properties and scenery need to be light and portable, performing areas are often difficult and ill-suited and there is no chance to build up a close relationship with a local audience. Added to this, many people in smaller towns are unwilling to see an acknowledged gay group, especially if they consider themselves to be homosexual but wish to keep this fact secret.

The other great practical problem is that hardy perennial, lack of finance. Small audiences, high travelling costs and heavy accommodation expenses mean that gay groups have either to be subsidised or to rely on volunteers willing to donate their leisure time and endure a spartan lifestyle. However, prejudice can adversely affect subsidy, or the subsidy given one gay group might be used as an excuse for not funding others. The infamous Clause 28[30] will also make local authorities very wary of funding any theatre which can arguably be accused of 'promoting' homosexuality. Part-timers financing themselves escape these political problems and retain greater autonomy, but a constant battle against poverty soon becomes disspiriting.

People tend to form gay theatre groups with two sets of objectives in mind: political and artistic. But these frequently clash, since what makes for a good piece of theatre does not necessarily make for good propaganda and vice-versa.

Consider, for example, the issue of characterisation. Modern gay groups have been determined to show positive images of gay people to counteract the plethora of negative ones broadcast by the mass media. The neurotic queens of yesteryear were rightly discarded, but audiences must sometimes have found the politicised figures who replaced them a little bland in comparison. Psychology

was dismissed in the rush to create characters who were representatives of an oppressed class, another necessary development which often weakened the resulting drama. Liberation sometimes became an artistic straightjacket, severely restricting the freedom of all the artists involved.

Therefore, a compromise must be struck between the members of a group who see its primary function as political and those whose main interest is aesthetic. A synthesis of art and politics has to be constantly thrashed out. Political misgivings will rule out many plays, whatever their artistic merit, and yet a constant diet of 'political' theatre can easily become boring for workers who wish to create complex art.

Equally, the dual function that gay groups generally take on board - to educate the general public about homosexuality and to provide gay people with their own unique culture - creates a further set of conflicts. A play that satisfies the first criterion often fails the second. A drama which deals openly with a controversial aspect of gay life may well reinforce prejudice or stereotyping. Yet if groups restrict themselves only to 'safe' topics which offer no ammunition to bigots, they fail to speak candidly about the issues which gay people most want raised. The hierarchical structures of traditional theatre leave these difficult decisions to the author or director; actors who belong to a group partly for ideological reasons are less willing to abrogate their rights over what they perform. This is certainly more democratic, but often more problematic.

The themes which can be raised by a gay group are limited by another factor: any play with gay characters still tends to be

seen as a 'gay play' and other issues it raises become secondary. A few well-worn themes begin to repeat themselves; the same issues, characters, situations and dialogues re-occur with predictable regularity.

Even when a group is able to avoid this repetition, it can still find itself marginalised by others as a 'gay group'. Gay theatre is seen as having value for the gay minority only, of no relevance beyond this little circle. Most gay theatre may indeed be limited and ephemeral - as is nearly all theatre - but the same critical marginalisation tends not to occur with plays about heterosexual relationships. Also, access to the mass media is restricted, so that the theatre produced by gay groups stays in the studios and gay pubs even when it deserves to reach a wider audience.

In view of all this, the question must be faced squarely: how much has the emergence of gay groups changed anything? When one considers that Gay Sweatshop, even at their most popular, played to a couple of hundred people each night and contrasts this with the millions who regularly saw John Inman and Larry Grayson deliver their stereotypes on TV, it is difficult not to conclude that gay groups are whistling in the wind. Confronted with this evidence, Trevor Griffiths' 'strategic penetration' of the mass media might seem a more useful tactic than separatist artistic development.

But a count of heads is not the only statistic that matters. Going to the theatre is, for most people, a less common and more direct experience than watching television and might be capable of leaving a deeper impression on that account. Nor does the political content of a play have to be watered down in the theatre, as it

always does when subjected to the bland tyranny of TV and radio. Finally, the gathering together of gay people into one place is something only the theatre can achieve. The lone spectator of television remains atomised; a theatre audience often evolves into a unified entity with a character of its own. In the recent past, much gay theatre has thus become a celebration in which the audience joins together to enjoy their collective identity.

Having dwelt on the problems facing gay theatre groups, I feel it is essential to finish by noting their achievements so far. For whatever the difficulties, groups have managed to create theatre which was relevant, intelligent, accomplished and occasionally brilliant. Gay Sweatshop's impressive track record shows that conflicts can be overcome by something as simple as friendship. Listing the problems facing the first gay groups may have given a false impression of unending struggle and conflict, whereas their members generally liked and respected each other, united by their mutual commitment to the post-GLF gay movement. Furthermore, the clash of beliefs and personalities often actually helped the final product, ensuring a drama rich in texture and full of conflicting ideas.

While the effects of gay groups may have been small in numerical terms, they have certainly been significant and far-reaching. They risked preaching to the converted, becoming elitist and cut off from the mainstream of gay life, churning over and over the same issues and alienating many gay people because of their political stance. (I have spoken to many homosexuals who refused to watch Gay Sweatshop because they considered them to be too 'left-wing'.) However, Gay Sweatshop's significance went beyond any success they

had on an immediate didactic level. They marked a crucial step towards a self-defined gay drama, one which grew out of the concerns of gay people rather than was created and performed by outsiders. By the middle of the 1980s, numerous gay groups were making a self-consciously gay theatre and many plays were reaching mainstream audiences which would have been considered highly controversial a decade earlier. Every one of them owed an enormous debt to the pioneers in their field, Gay Sweatshop.

SECTION 4

SMASHING THE STEREOTYPES

INTRODUCTION

The dominant feature of homosexual characterisation in the 1960s was stereotyping. The subsequent decade saw several reactions against this by a generation made bold and radical through involvement with GLF. The general thrust of the period was to smash the old stereotypes and change forever the image of gay people on the stage.

Writers and performers shared this aim, but used various (often diametrically opposed) methods to achieve their purpose. Polemical gay theatre had set an example by creating the new figure of the politicised lesbian or gay man. But the desire to debunk the dual myths of the butch dyke and the screaming queen went beyond the relatively small world of gay activism, and less committed authors also began to challenge these formulaic figures.

All agreed that the stereotypes of the sixties, if not completely unfounded, were gross distortions of reality. Therefore, authors began to write plays with new types of gay characters in them, reflections of the gay people they met in their own lives. Just as the word 'homosexual' had been replaced by 'gay', so 'homosexual' characters had to make way for 'gay' ones.

Gay Sweatshop effectively created a new stereotype in their politicised heroes and heroines. Elsewhere, though, writers attempted to throw out the old stereotypes through two completely opposite methods: the restrained realism of gay naturalism or the blatant exhibitionism of drag and genderfuck.

Homosexual theatre had a history of melodrama and suicide; gay naturalism removed the hysteria by depicting gays as unexceptional people. Gay people appeared on stage in everyday situations and discussed their problems with Chekhovian understatement. The

different mores that existed on the gay scene were highlighted, but the emphasis lay in stressing the similarities between homosexual and heterosexual experience.

Genderfuck theatre went to the other extreme and created a series of fantastic and flamboyant characters who gloried in their unusual personae. These characters were more extravagant, glamorous and sexually indeterminate than the most degrading stereotype, but with the crucial difference that they did not see this as a tragic circumstance. Pushed to their limits in this way, the stereotypes were sent up and rendered ridiculous and the very idea of normality was called into question. Other work took a more analytical approach, using figures in drag to examine the meanings Western society attaches to the biological difference between male and female.

This section will examine these two responses to stereotyping, beginning with theatre that aims to use drag as a way of questioning society's concepts of normality in sexual behaviour. It will then study gay naturalism, a genre which makes a virtue of the ordinary and commonplace.

9. CARRY ON SCREAMING

There is a significant difference in tone between the effeminate characters created by Dyer in Staircase and those created by Behan in The Hostage. For all that they are figures of fun, Behan's queens are also defiant standard-bearers for their kind. The Theatre of the Ridiculous, which sprang up in the United States at the end of the 1960s, represented the apotheosis of the flamboyant rebel first given form by Behan. It took stereotypes to their reductio ad absurdum and shattered normality in the process.

The Theatre of the Ridiculous took place off-off-Broadway, relying on a sophisticated urban audience to appreciate it. A true minority theatre, its loud, gaudy transvestism could only have evolved on New York's fringe circuit. Its origins can be traced back to the Caffe Cino, a venue which staged several plays with a gay theme during the 1960s. One of these, The Madness of Lady Bright, anticipates The Theatre of the Ridiculous in its characterisation of Lady Bright, a screaming queen proud of his outrageous effeminacy.

Another forerunner was Robert Patrick's The Haunted Host (1964) also produced at the Caffe Cino. This is the story of a playwright, Jay, who lives in the gay cruising area of New York. Painful memories are stirred for him when a young man arrives at his door looking for a place to sleep, for the boy happens to be a physical double of his dead lover. Jay exorcises his grief and resentment

through this chance meeting, using the hapless young man as a target for his biting sarcasm and bitter, camp wit. The bristling dialogue could easily come from a Ridiculous play, as could the character of Jay: waspish, hedonistic, amoral, brilliant and destructive. Jay aggressively defends his way of life and mocks the boy's conventional views about love and sex:

JAY: There's a question I've always wanted to ask someone.
FRANK: What is it?
JAY: I hope you won't be offended.
FRANK: Well, what? No, of course not. What?
JAY: Well - you're heterosexual, aren't you?
FRANK: Sure!
JAY: Now, don't get angry, I'm only satisfying my curiosity - or perhaps I should say I'm satisfying only my curiosity -
FRANK: Oh, come on -
JAY: Tell me, Frank, how long have you BEEN heterosexual?
FRANK: What do you mean? I've ALWAYS been heterosexual!
JAY: Started as a kid, huh? Tsk-tsk. Tell me, do you think one of your teachers, or possibly even one of your parents might have been heterosexual? Do you think that might be the reason you -
FRANK: (interrupting) All right, all right, just shut up, okay?'

These plays mark the starting block for The Theatre of the Ridiculous. They are witty and decadent, make fun of puritanical attitudes towards sex and reflect the sexual values of New York's gay subculture. However, they stop short of the later drama in still advocating a liberal attitude towards homosexuality. They also contain a naturalistic element which the Ridiculous will discard entirely.

A further breakdown happens in The Theatre of the Ridiculous. Linear plot gives way to episodic action and transvestite song-and-dance routines; realistic characterisation is replaced by

transexual cartoons; conventional morality melts in a glittering pageant of witty kitsch. The Ridiculous deliberately aims to be camp, tasteless and tacky, borrowing its imagery from the drag show and the B-movie.

The Theatre of the Ridiculous centred on Vaccaro's Playhouse of the Ridiculous off-off-Broadway and on the work of three authors, Ludlam, Tavel and Bernard. It enjoyed its most fertile period in the late sixties and early seventies, the years when the concept of genderfuck became a vital element in Gay Liberation thinking. Genderfuck was an attempt to smash traditional gender-roles by the deliberate adoption of the role assumed to be natural to the opposite gender: biological males wore dresses to become social females and vice versa. Since this idea was essentially theatrical, in that it involved the donning of costume and the playing out of a strange role, it hardly seems surprising that it swept into the theatre. The stereotyped queen of the 1960s had been a tragic figure trapped by his 'condition'; the Ridiculous queen was a narcissistic transexual laughing at the 'normal' behaviour of the heterosexual majority.

The essential elements of this theatre have been succinctly summed up by Ruby Cohn, when she lists them as 'sexual exuberance and transvestism, the mix-and-match of 'high' and 'low' culture, camp, visual flamboyance, and comic humiliation of respectable figures.'[2].

Transvestism became commonplace in The Ridiculous. Tavel's The Life of Lady Godiva (1967) contained a chorus of transvestite nuns; the same playwright's The Life of Juanita Castro (1966) called for Juanita to be played by a man and Fidel, Raul and Ché to be

played by women; Queen of Greece (1973) included Plato depicted as a drag queen. Bernard declared that the characters in his plays could often be played by either gender. Genet's example (in The Maids) was probably important here, but the real inspiration came from the drag shows of the metropolitan gay scene.

Hence Cohn's reference to 'the mix-and-match of 'high' and 'low' culture'.[3] The tacky, tawdry drag show inspired an essential part of Ridiculous drama, as did the low-budget movie and the second-rate television series. Tavel's Gorilla Queen (1967) featured a transexual Queen Kong; Ludlam's Big Hotel (1967) burlesqued the film, Grand Hotel; the same author's Hot Ice (1974) was a parody of a TV cop show. Yet the playwrights of The Ridiculous were extremely well-read and were equally at ease dipping into 'high' culture. Ludlam's When Queens Collide (1968) was a burlesque of Marlowe's Tamburlaine; Duberman's Elagabalus (1973) assumed a knowledge of Roman history; Greek history formed the backdrop for Tavel's Queen of Greece (1973).

Famous names were ruthlessly travestied and no reputation guaranteed immunity: Plato, Socrates, Guevara, Castro, Lady Godiva. This was not restricted to historical figures, for Jackie Onassis was caricatured in Queen of Greece and Anita Bryant was the butt of Tavel's Ovens of Anita Orangejuice: A History of Modern Florida (1978).

The style of acting used by The Ridiculous was camp, exaggerated and exhibitionist. Again, there had been a foretaste of this in Patrick's The Haunted Host, as in this sequence:

FRANK: (Frankly) Are you a homosexual?
JAY: (Casually) Don't mention it.
FRANK: No, are you?
JAY: (Grabbing an ostrich fan or fur piece from somewhere) Do I LOOK like a homosexual?[4]

In the plays of Tavel, Ludlam and Bernard, the characters gleefully seized their ostrich fans and shrieked their sexual preferences. Homosexuality was not something to be hidden, or mentioned in discreet tones, but a way of life which should be publicised and boasted about. Gay people should make no attempt to be like the mass of humanity, but should relish their role on the fringes of society and treasure their abnormality. (The debt to Genet seems obvious.) The figures on stage mocked themselves, but also ridiculed the whole of humanity. The truly ridiculous thing was a belief in normality and the effort to make people behave according to repressive social customs.

Feathers, furs and finery formed the indispensable props of The Theatre of the Ridiculous, a theatre not so much homosexual as transvestite in nature. The drag queen was its essential central character. Far from being the ordinary people of gay naturalism, the characters of Ludlam, Bernard and Tavel were deliberately extraordinary, glorifying in their extravagant transvestism.

After a few years, The Theatre of the Ridiculous ran out of energy, as both Tavel and Ludlam moved towards linear plotting and realistic characterisation. If Gay Sweatshop's theatre was a product of the marriage between Marxism and sexual politics in Britain, The Ridiculous was a product of the theatricalism of American gay activism. As times changed and gay politics entered

a new phase on both sides of the Atlantic, new forms of theatre developed.

The Theatre of the Ridiculous was essentially the work of a small clique of people who lived in New York's gay and transvestite subcultures. Its influence can be detected in shows as disparate as The Rocky Horror Picture Show and Torch Song Trilogy, but in its pure form it remained too alien for many people and stayed locked in its own tiny universe.

It was an unreliable form in political terms. Capable of being joyous, liberating or disturbing, it could just as easily be reactionary, like the drag shows out of which it sprang. The Ridiculous relied on audiences familiar with the ideas of genderfuck: anyone entering the auditorium with hostile feelings would have their prejudices confirmed, and those who disliked drag would soon become irritated or bored. Essentially a shared joke, The Theatre of the Ridiculous depended on attracting a highly selective audience.

Stated simply, the ridiculous becomes tedious once it is repeated ad nauseam. Just as Gay Sweatshop's texts can make one long for a character who is not a fount of politicised wisdom, The Theatre of the Ridiculous makes one yearn for a male character not smothered in baubles, bangles and bright, shiny beads. An 'ordinary' homosexual can seem extremely interesting after a long line of transvestites have strutted their stuff on the stage. Striking transexual figures lose their most vital asset - the power to shock - and ultimately elicit no response whatsoever. The Ridiculous never escaped from its own self-indulgence to broaden out into more than a private joke.

It is a paradox that modern anti-intellectual movements have tended to spring from intellectuals. This is certainly true of The Theatre of the Ridiculous. Its authors were learned men with a penchant for recondite references and arcane history who were ultimately putting across ideas rather than emotions. Many people might find pleasure in a promiscuous lifestyle, or enjoy dressing up in drag, but only an intellectual would make these things into a raison d'être or build a philosophical edifice out of such behaviour. The plays of Tavel, Ludlam and Bernard might be brilliantly witty, but they are devoid of emotional content and do not contain enough affective warmth to hold the interest.

The Ridiculous did not travel well and had little direct impact on Britain. British taste, or at least the middle-class taste which dominates our theatre, generally prefers its drama to be reasoned and reasonable. Yet some essential elements of The Ridiculous filtered through to Britain, generally via the political cross-fertilisation which energised the gay movement at the time. In particular, a number of political revues came over from the States which used the technique of shocking through genderfuck. American transvestism met British drag, a form of working-class entertainment which had always boasted a large number of homosexual performers and which was experiencing a revival in the all-male environment of the new gay pubs.

Cross-dressing on the stage did not begin with The Theatre of the Ridiculous; it is as old as dramatic history, as is confusion of gender. Tavel and Ludlam could not hold a candle to the Elizabethan stage, where boys pretended to be girls pretending to

be boys in plays like Twelfth Night and As You Like It. There are outrageously effeminate characters in the comedies of Aristophanes, and even Greek tragedy sometimes showed hermaphroditism and transvestism, most famously in The Bacchae.

Gay Liberation made a political statement out of transvestism, but it did not invent drag. Cross-dressing clearly played an important part in the Molly Houses, the first homosexual subculture of which reports are available. That this link between homosexuality and transvestism extended into the Victorian period is proven by the trial of the transvestites, Boulton and Park, in 1871.

Drag on the modern British stage also has a long history,[5] stretching back at least as far as Music Hall. From Dougie Byng's revues to Old Mother Riley to the pantomime dame, men in women's clothes have decorated the British boards for over a century. However, the modern drag show, with its ersatz glamour and crude content, only began to flourish after the Second World War.

A group of World War I servicemen called Splinters toured an all-male revue around Britain in the years between the wars. ENSA entertained the troops in the Far East during World War II, using cross-dressing of necessity since all its performers were male. But things really took off once the war ended. A group of ex-servicemen made managements a lot of money in 1944 with a successful revue called We Were In The Forces. After this financial coup, the following years saw the provincial theatre-houses hosting a succession of drag revues with names like Soldiers In Skirts and Forces Showboat. These smashed all box-office records. The idea of soldiers in women's clothing attracting huge audiences may seem bizarre to us now, but the public felt warmth and gratitude

towards the troops and took an innocent pleasure in what were essentially innocent shows. The drag was far removed from the lurid sexual exhibitionism of recent years, the humour was less blue and the man in a dress looked more like a pantomime dame than a femme fatale.

Drag gradually became less respectable. The ex-soldiers gave way to professional performers with a reputation for dubious sexual behaviour. Eventually it became disreputable to perform in a drag revue, and doing so meant sacrificing any chance of 'legitimate' work elsewhere. The Lord Chamberlain ordered that wigs must be removed at the end of every show, but this attempt at moral propriety could not prevent the revues from accruing an unsavoury reputation.

The theatrical phenomenon had blown itself out by the mid-1950s. The large provincial theatres were being forced out of business and drag performers faced with unemployment moved to pubs and clubs. It must be stressed that these were not gay pubs, which scarcely existed at the time outside of the West End, but rough, working-class pubs in the East End or working men's clubs in the industrial North. Each performer had to develop a distinctive stage persona to distinguish her from the competition, and the teamwork of the revue gave way to the individualism of the one-person show. Acts survived only if the name on the poster had the quick wit and caustic tongue to silence the drunken hecklers in the audience.

Drag stuttered along in these dingy venues for a decade, occasionally attracting the attentions of the police when it strayed over the line and became too blue. The artistic form seemed one in terminal decline, until Danny La Rue fronted his own club in Hanover

Square in 1964 and attracted Princess Margaret to the audience. Drag became fashionable overnight and experienced a sudden revival.

Shows were still completely live at this time; miming was a thing of the future. Artists sang, danced and told jokes, accompanied by a pianist or a small band. Then an act called Alvis and O'Dell introduced one scene in which they mimed to a tape-recording of Susan Maugham's Bobby's Girl and gave birth to mime-drag, an immediate success because of its novelty value. At the same time, drag was discarding its homely ENSA origins and slapping on a more glamorous face. An entertainment emerged which was recognisably the drag of today, where a female impersonator squeezes into a succession of sequinned frocks and gyrates to a recording of Shirley Bassey.

From the very beginning, drag was perceived as containing a subversive element and frequently earned the attentions of the police. Police activity was doubtless all the more strenuous because the pubs at which drag shows took place were beginning to attract a homosexual clientele and develop into embryonic gay pubs. Officialdom disapproved of drag, and the Lord Chamberlain himself sometimes took action against it. A show called Sh... opened at the New Century Theatre at Notting Hill Gate containing one scene where Douglas Druce impersonated the Queen. Although popular with the audience, who applauded and cheered for about seven minutes, the royal entrance did not please the Lord Chamberlain, who appeared in person the following evening and threatened to close down the theatre unless the management removed the offending scene.

Any subversion sparked off by drag probably existed in the minds of the authorities more than in reality, but the 1970s saw several deliberate attempts to exploit drag's radical potential. This often took place on the streets, as when members of GLF demonstrated outside the court where several feminists were being tried for offences committed during their disruption of the Miss World competition. The men in GLF dressed up in bikinis and swimsuits bearing humorous names of mock contestants such as 'Miss Used' and 'Miss Trial'. Throughout the 1970s, drag became a regular element of gay marches and demonstrations.

In 1976, a group called Hot Peaches arrived from the States with their brand of political drag cabaret called The Divas of Sheridan Square. Transvestism was a popular motif in New York fringe theatre and Hot Peaches set an example for their staider British colleagues. Gay Sweatshop showed they had not escaped the influence in a show called Man-Mad, and two new groups, Brixton Faeries and Bloolips, emerged as a result of this theatrical shot in the arm.

Bloolips create a highly distinctive form of 'drag'. They make no attempt to appear like real women. On the contrary, their drag is made up of an assortment of strange items (lampshades, laundry baskets, tea strainers). Their faces are painted white like clowns and their costumes are often elaborate jokes. For instance, in Teenage Trash one character wears a wedding dress that comes complete with an attached male suitor and a huge hat in the shape of a wedding cake. This element of their work has a good-humoured surrealistic tinge; it seems a direct descendant of the elaborate street drag of early 1970s gay activism.

Yet there is another strand in Bloolips' work which is distinctly British and can be traced back to music hall and ENSA-style revues. This consists of a stream of bad puns and asides, slapstick routines and song-and-dance numbers. The audience are brought into the action and addressed directly; no attempt is made to disguise the theatricality of the event. Bloolips' 'star' performer, Bette Bourne, has the skill and technique of a music hall comedian as he banters with the audience and ad-libs around the script.

This traditional form is used, however, in the service of a radical ideology. Bloolips' politics originate in the ideas of GLF and the group deliberately set out to upset conventional concepts of male and female. They achieve this physically - through androgynous costumes - and more discursively in the lyrics of songs like Drag That Frock, where Bette Bourne dons a scarlet frock and tells us why he enjoys dressing up in women's clothes.

'Masculinity' is constantly ridiculed or censured. Traditional drag sends up women; Bloolips subvert this process and use drag to make fun of men. Teenage Trash is built on the idea that a suit escapes from Burton's window and then terrorises the neighbourhood, attacking women and 'effeminate' men. The suit is employed as a metaphor for the restrictions of 'masculinity' and a link is made between this individual oppression and large-scale political oppression. As with all Bloolips' work, striking images are employed to get across their message; a giant cardboard suit stomps onto the stage and forces the rest of the cast to climb into closets (actually cardboard wardrobes).

Bloolips are fun, but they are not always comfortable. Teenage Trash, for instance, contains a song called Daddy is Dangerous which breaks in the middle while the singer recites a list of young children who have been sexually molested or killed by their fathers (e.g. Jasmine Beckford). Many might consider this the height of bad taste, but the link between violence and masculinity is forcibly made and one cannot avoid facing the issues involved. The fact that the show up to this point has been comic and good-humoured adds further to the impact of this moment. Most drag assumes a highly conventional set of opinions about men and women; Bloolips combine the techniques of tacky drag shows with the 'pink politics' of Gay Liberation.

Bloolips have been one of the most successful cabaret groups of the 1980s, having built up a cult following with shows like Lust in Space, Yum Yum, Vamp and Camp, Slung Back and Strapless and Teenage Trash. They have been even more successful abroad, having been awarded an OBIE for their costume design. They are an ideal example of how drag need not be reactionary but can be used in a truly radical way while still remaining both entertaining and stunning to the eye.

'Drag' is generally understood to be men dressing up as women, but the reverse can also occur. Female-to-male drag has been a central element of several movies: The Blue Angel, Queen Kristina, the three versions of Victor/Victoria, a story about a woman pretending to be a man pretending to be a woman. However, male-to-female drag is vastly more common and also causes far more extreme and hostile reactions.

It is even rather difficult for a woman to dress in drag nowadays, for she is free to wear trousers, shirt or jacket without exciting the slightest interest. The opposite - men wearing skirts in public - still seems a long way off, despite a brief flirtation with 'gender-bending' in the mid-1980s. These sartorial facts stem from the rigidity of the male role. As women have radically adjusted the way they perceive themselves and their role in society, they have begun to wear clothes (particularly trousers) which were once reserved for the male. Men have not moved far in the opposite direction, in spite of small details such as the wearing of earrings and scent (called after-shave when marketed for a man). The male role imparts privilege but is stiflingly rigid (witness the total conformity demanded in all-male environments like public schools and the Army) and this inflexibility is reflected in what men are allowed to wear.

Women's and men's clothes tend to have a different function in society. Women's clothes are primarily decorative, worn to make the wearer look more attractive; men's clothes are primarily functional, either in practical terms (overalls) or symbolic ones (the pin-striped suit which announces membership of the business fraternity). Women and men are likely to cross-dress for different reasons. A woman may wear jacket and trousers for their practicality or in order to demand respect from her business colleagues. A man who wears a skirt enjoys bright colours and sensuous textures denied him in his everyday clothes. The former is dressing down, the latter is dressing up.

Reactions to the two forms of cross-dressing are vastly different. If she attracts any attention at all, a woman in

man's clothes tends to elicit a certain unease, even fear; she is the virago, the dangerous dyke. In contrast, a man in woman's clothing becomes a figure of fun, for laughter always results when a member of a superior class mimics a member of an inferior one (which is why white comics used to black up to make audiences laugh).

Therefore, drag has usually taken the form of male-to-female cross-dressing. Nevertheless, there have been some female-to-male groups, and Kris Kirk states in his book, Men In Frocks, that one of the best pieces of cabaret he ever saw was The Club, performed by six women. The group dressed up as members of an American men's club in the 1900s and performed genuine music-hall songs of the period, all of which bore vehemently misogynistic lyrics. Thus, the women subverted the sexism of most drag (which caricatures women in order to ridicule them) and achieved the exact opposite, using the form to mock the misogyny of 'normal' male behaviour.

In the 1980s, drag has achieved respectability. Danny La Rue has 'spectaculars' on peak-hour TV, Hinge and Bracket star in their own situation comedy, middle-of-the-road family entertainment like The Dick Emery Show and The Two Ronnies contains frequent drag sketches. Mime-drag now monopolises the pub circuit. This is frequently of a deplorable standard, consisting of little more than songs poorly mimed by a talentless queen in a succession of tacky frocks. The content is usually racist, sexist and even homophobic. Coarse language and crude gestures fill the role once played by wit and performing skill.

Yet even mime-drag can be transformed in the hands of an

artist, as in the case of Dave Dale, a young man who has dragged this ailing genre up to date. His work is funny and barbed, with a bite and intelligence absent from most established drag acts. He generally rejects the 'glam' drag of glittering jewellery and sequinned frocks, making no attempt to appear like a real woman. He assumes both male and female characters and deliberately avoids the sexist caricatures of mainstream drag.

For example, one of his most popular numbers pokes fun at the ultra-masculine images currently popular on the gay scene. As Dale sings, in a controlled bass voice which edges up the octaves until it reaches its natural falsetto, he places a series of hats on his head: a soldier's beret, a sailor's cap, a construction helmet. The lyrics chart the daily dress patterns of the modern gay 'clone':

> On Mondays I dress up like a soldier,
> On Tuesdays I dress up like James Dean,
> On Wednesdays with the men in
> Lots of dirty denim,
> On Thursdays a marine!

The bulk of pub drag creates mocking caricatures of women; Dale reverses this and ridicules 'masculinity' and the symbols of masculinity which have become fashionable on the gay scene. Many homosexual men need to prove their manliness by donning the masculine drag of leather, denim and khaki, even in an age where homosexuality has become more accepted:

> Oh God, we went through all that liberation,
> You'd really think that something would have changed;
> But no, it seems we still
> Go out dressed up to kill,
> Or, at the very least, dressed up to maim.[7]

Beneath the leather and denim lies an old anxiety, the fear of being a 'sissy'. In an attempt to reassure himself about his masculinity, the character blusters out the final line of the song: 'I'm just as much a macho man as you!'.[8] Only by disguising his self-doubt beneath a show of aggression and joining crowds of other men dressed in the same way, can the character come to terms with his sexuality.

Of course, the song is no longer funny when analysed in this depth. As with all drag, Dale's work relies on making an instant impact through bold, colourful imagery. It has a joy and spontaneity which lifts the audience even as it pokes fun at them (many of the people in Dale's audiences sport the exact images which he satirises). Dave Dale uses a traditional form and infuses it with a modern outlook, proving that pub drag can still provide a vehicle for intelligent and entertaining work.

Drag has played a large part in gay cabaret, particularly among the political groups of the last decade. It has also been used by individual performers such as Simon Fanshawe and Mark Bunyan, both of whom write witty, pungent songs on personal and political issues. The revue format of songs and short sketches has appealed to many because of its political potential and its adaptability to venues such as pubs and church halls. Both drag and cabaret have a long history in gay theatre (and in gay culture in general) which can only be touched on in a thesis that concentrates on 'legitimate' theatre. However, they form a vital thread in gay culture and their influence has spread over into traditional forms of gay drama.

Drag is a theatrical form which emphasises externals rather than essences. It works best when it is most spontaneous and makes its effects visually, without recourse to the intellect. In similar vein, The Theatre of the Ridiculous was deliberately anti-rational, rejecting the logic of consistent characterisation, plot and discursive argument.

However, not all theatre using the figure of the drag queen as its central character took an anti-rational approach. The works of a Canadian novelist and playwright, Michel Tremblay, portrayed the transvestite community of Montreal in order to analyse gender roles in modern Western society. His best-known play, Hosanna, (1973) had its British premiere at the Birmingham Repertory Studio before moving down to the London fringe. It was a fascinating exploration of one of the themes which dominated thinking after the renaissance of feminism: the significance of 'male' and 'female' in our culture.

At first glance, Hosanna presents two characters who are so stereotyped as to border on the absurd, two gay clichés carried to their logical extreme. Hosanna (real name Claude) is a 'cheap transvestite, touching and sad, exasperating in her self-exaltation'.[9] Cuirette (real name Raymond) is a 'stud grown old and fat, his leather jacket, once tight and provocative, has been too small for a long time'.[10] (The reviewer from The Daily Mail rather cruelly described them as 'a hysterical transvestite and his leather-boy lover'.)[11] The setting, too, exudes the gloom and isolation endemic to drama about homosexuality: 'It is an atmosphere of sadness and solitude.'.[12]

Hosanna is a bright star in the tiny firmament of Montreal's

transvestite clique. A farmer's son who ran away to the big city at the age of sixteen, Hosanna has gradually clawed her way to the top of this world. She has always dreamt of making an entrance like Elizabeth Taylor in Cleopatra, and when the theme of the annual Drag Ball is 'Great Characters in History', the opportunity seems to have presented itself. But Hosanna has been set up; all the other transvestites also arrive as Cleopatra and every one of them is dressed more splendidly than she.

This plot may sound embarrassing, and yet Tremblay uses it to delve into the contradictions that make up Hosanna. She is a complex mix of the vulnerable and the vicious, and, although Tremblay insists that she should be portrayed as sad rather than funny, our response to her is more complicated than pure sympathy. On stage, the effeminate homosexual has generally been a figure of fun, the ridicule sometimes softened by condescending pity. In contrast, Tremblay plunges into murky depths other writers have never entered, an inner world of doubts and contradictions:

> When I'm dressed like a man, I'm ridiculous. When I'm dressed like a woman, I'm ridiculous. But I'm really ridiculous when I'm stuck between the two, like I am right now, with my woman's face, my woman's underwear, and my own body ...[13]

But if Tremblay stopped there, Hosanna would be merely a superior variation on a well-worn theme: the unhappiness of the effeminate homosexual. Instead, he shows that Hosanna's personality is far more complex than any stereotype and that her self-image of bitchy transvestite is often at odds with her inner feelings. In her relationship with Cuirette, it is she who earns the money, pays the rent, makes the decisions and takes the role traditionally

regarded as the masculine one: 'I'm the man of the house, Cuirette. I'm the man.'.[14] As with the characters of The Theatre of the Ridiculous, Hosanna has glorified in her chosen lifestyle and has selected the mask which she wishes to wear in public. Attaining the image of Elizabeth Taylor in Cleopatra was to have been the crowning glory of her life's work. When her great moment ends in ridiculous failure, Hosanna is quite prepared to face the consequences: 'You asked for your pile of shit, Hosanna de-Ste-Eustace. Well, here it is. Your big pile of shit.'.[15]

Tremblay slowly dissects Cuirette's 'masculine' self-image in the same way. Superficially, he is the archetypal 'butch' gay man: he wears leathers, rides a motor-bike, hates women, cruises the park for quick, anonymous sex and cultivates a harsh, aggressive masculinity. If Hosanna has modelled herself on Elizabeth Taylor in Cleopatra, Cuirette's paradigm is Marlon Brando in The Wild Ones. But contradictions seethe beneath the leather-clad exterior, some of which Hosanna highlights when she asks:

> Is it my dresses that turn you on, or is it me? Is it Hosanna, the drag queen, or Claude, the farmer? If Hosanna turns you on, then why do you sleep with a guy? And if its Claude, then why do you sleep with a guy who looks like a woman?[16]

Cuirette may hope to become the perfect stud, but his temperament is often at odds with his outer machismo. In their domestic affairs, he takes the position traditionally reserved for the woman, for he is economically dependent on Hosanna and does the cooking and cleaning: 'What are you? Hein? A cleaning lady who rides a motorcycle when she gets off work!'.[17] Plagued by failure, he cannot find work and has lost his artistic inspiration

after a bad trip on LSD. For all his hard shell, Cuirette is the partner who is emotionally fragile and has the streak of sentimentality in his nature.

Cuirette's life has also reached crisis point. His muscles are turning to fat and he can no longer get the quick sexual conquests which are a vital part of his being. The park which has been his cruising ground for the last fifteen years is busy and brightly lit. Like Hosanna, he has chosen his self-image but it has now become a dead shell in which he is trapped. Both of them are getting older and are unable to adapt to the changes that are happening in the world.

Their relationship is inauthentic because they relate to each other as symbols rather than as individuals. They have never openly expressed their love for each other as two men, even avoiding the use of their real names, Claude and Raymond. Instead, they have related as surrogate-man and surrogate-woman; unable to love each other as homosexuals, they have built their relationship on inapplicable heterosexual norms. In theory, Cuirette is the 'man' and Hosanna is the 'woman', but the reality is far more subtle than this and they cannot squeeze themselves into this schematic framework. The only way they can maintain the lie is by exaggerating their roles to ridiculous extremes, each using the other partner's self-image as a way of validating his own.

During the night of the Drag Ball, when her attempt at Elizabeth Taylor in Cleopatra ends in ridicule and ruin, Hosanna begins to pierce through this masquerade: 'And right there, I completely destroyed my papier mâché set! Because you had completely destroyed my papier mâché life.'.[18]

At the very end of the play, Hosanna reaches a decision, physically represented on stage by the removal of her make-up and wig. She will no longer try to be a counterfeit woman in a parody of a heterosexual relationship, and she gives Cuirette an ultimatum:

> If I ran out, Raymond, its because ... I'm not a woman ... And you're going to have to get used to that ... [19]

The play ends with Hosanna and Cuirette in each other's arms, making their first attempt to discard the dead forms of the past. Hosanna is physically naked, having removed her clothes, make-up and wig, and psychologically naked, having stepped out of her shell. The two characters are facing up to themselves as a homosexual couple, no longer trying to behave like an idealised Man and Wife.

Hosanna places a magnifying glass over recent gay history. After 1969, homosexuals sought a distinctive self-identity which was not determined by heterosexual standards, sharing the belief that gay people should not model their relationships on heterosexual marriage. Hosanna and Cuirette grew up in a world where homosexuals mimicked heterosexual models because they had no alternative; they belonged to a furtive gay underworld where men were either 'bitch' or 'butch'. This gradually changed as homosexuality became more legitimate and the gay movement grew in confidence. There were now alternatives to stereotyped role-playing and casual sex: 'Cleopatra is dead, and the Parc Lafontaine is all lit up.'.[20]

Hosanna and Cuirette have resisted these changes. As Cuirette says of their claustrophobic flat, 'This is the only place I know where nothing changes. The only place where Time just stops.'.[21]

But Time finally invades even this sanctuary and both characters are forced to readjust. This is partly the result of simple ageing which has put lines on Hosanna's face and inches on Cuirette's stomach. But it also stems from the differing role that gay people play in society after Gay Liberation, changes to which Hosanna and Cuirette have immense difficulty in adapting.

Hosanna is certainly a flawed script. It is often wordy and Act One sometimes descends into little more than a bizarre variation on Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. One suspects from the language he used that George Oppenheimer of The Financial Times wanted to dislike the play, but there is some truth in his description of Hosanna as 'a repetitious and lengthy cat fight between two deviates'.[22] Nevertheless, it contains two powerful characters with great dramatic resonance. The play's visual symbolism neatly matches its psychological content and the script manages a fine balance between humour and pathos. Furthermore, it is optimistic without offering pat solutions.

Hosanna introduces us to two stereotypes of the most appalling kind and takes them to pieces before our eyes. The play is relevant to homosexual and heterosexual alike, since its real subject-matter is not homosexuality but gender-roles. However, it is doubtful whether the play ever reached the wide audience it merited. Anyone staging the play faces the fundamental problem of making Hosanna's experience at the Drag Ball as important to the audience as it is to her. This traumatic evening is the watershed of Hosanna's life but is so distanced from most people's experience that it may be impossible for them to identify with. Thus, Douglas Watt of The New York Daily News could call the play 'a rather silly little

anecdote'[23] and Martin Gottfried of The New York Post found the revelation of what had happened to Hosanna at the Drag Ball 'a letdown'.[24] In conclusion, Hosanna may essentially be a play for a select audience who will not be so dazzled by the glittering surface that they fail to observe the mechanics underneath.

Reviews of performances, both in America and in Britain, were mixed. Even critics who enjoyed the play had their reservations. 'I had to overcome my initial reluctance to be drawn into the woman-hating world of high camp'[25], Rosalind Carne of The Times explained, although she eventually went on to call the play 'A gloriously affirmative work about homosexual men, which both explores and trashes destructive role-playing.'.[26]

As with The Theatre of the Ridiculous and with drag cabaret, the transvestite forms the central figure of Tremblay's work, but unlike them Tremblay takes an analytical approach and tries to delve beneath the sensational exterior. However, he is equally uncompromising in making no concessions to his audience who must accept or reject his work on its own terms. His plays bear the trappings of the sixties - the larger-than-life stereotypes, the sadness, the despair, the camp invective - and yet they avoid its reactionary conservativism. Hosanna may not dissuade a bigot from his or her prejudice, but it does explore many issues of special interest to gay people. Plays like Tremblay's mark a vital step towards a specific gay culture, an art which accepts homosexuality on its own terms rather than views it through the distorting glass of heterosexist preconceptions.

The varying expressions of genderfuck theatre, whether the extravagant parody of The Ridiculous, the gaudy tastelessness of

drag or the analytical psychology of Michel Tremblay, reflected the contemporary desire to create an authentic gay theatre. Like the more narrowly political theatre of Gay Sweatshop, genderfuck theatre grew out of the gay scene and made few concessions to society at large.

The inspiration behind the first gay theatre was essentially separatist. Weary of the distortions of stereotyping, the compromises of liberalism and the resistance of the theatrical establishment, gay artists broke away to create their own specific theatre. This may have led at times to an insular, self-congratulatory drama, but at others it made for exciting and unique work which would not have emerged out of mainstream theatre at that period. Genderfuck theatre rarely strayed beyond the tiny world for which it was created, but it had some influence on the wider stage in forms as varied as The Rocky Horror Picture Show, Torch Song Trilogy and La Cage Aux Folles.

In complete contrast, the impulse behind the other form of gay drama which aimed to smash stereotypes was towards integration. Gay naturalism stressed the ordinary in homosexual life and generally tried to reach a wider audience outside of any 'gay ghetto'. This drama, which emphasises the commonplace aspects of homosexual life, complements genderfuck theatre and forms the other broad thrust of a united effort to break away from the negative stereotyping of the 1960s.

10. ORDINARY PEOPLE

Between the years 1975 - 1985, a body of work accumulated which could be called gay naturalism.[1] Rejecting the schematic characterisation of political drama and genderfuck theatre, it depicted gay people as essentially ordinary. Some of its characters led lives which most people would find exotic - the rent-boys in Wilcox's Rents, for example - but even these were ordinary people in extraordinary situations. They were drawn in the round and their sexual orientation was not assumed to be the most important factor in their personality. They were never intended to be representative of gay people in general. Therefore, homosexuality was rarely the central theme in these plays; a homosexual relationship or a slice of gay life formed the backcloth against which wider issues were raised.

Gay naturalism developed in two broad directions. The first concentrated on creating a realistic portrayal of a slice of gay subculture, a fly-on-the-wall documentary of a world closed to most people; Wilcox's Rents is again a perfect example. The second avoided any kind of gay setting and showed instead how homosexual people accommodate to life in straight society: Accounts, set on a farm in the Borders; the television drama, More Lives Than One, about a married man living in suburbia. Both types of drama, though, lacked lengthy discussions about being homosexual or proselytising in favour of gay rights. Homosexuality was taken as given and neither condemned nor extolled.

Gay naturalism eschewed the overt polemics of political gay theatre. Characters were studied for their own interest rather than as social or political representatives of a sexual class. Their authors were not unaware of the example of Gay Sweatshop or the politics of GLF; it is no exaggeration to say they could not have written these plays without them. However, political statements could only be inserted on a subliminal level, disguised beneath a naturalistic surface.

In style and tone, gay naturalism was typical of modern British drama, which tends to contain realistic dialogue, rounded characterisation and an eye for the details of everyday life. Unlike the gay drama that owed a debt to Brecht or to drag shows, this was unadventurous in a formal sense. The plays in this category sometimes caused controversy, but it was their content rather than their style that offended.

The main producers of these plays in Britain were the studios and pub theatres which became centres for new writing during this period: places like The Bush and The Half Moon. These venues were willing to stage gay plays because gay people had gathered together in London, providing an audience large enough to fill a small theatre for a few weeks. Their naturalistic form also made these plays suitable for radio and TV (although controversial content obviously counteracted this). However, this work tended not to filter through to regional repertory theatres, presumably because managements felt that no audience existed or they were afraid of upsetting local opinion.[2]

There was doubtless much sense in this. It seems indisputable

that a play with homosexual characters will appeal primarily to gay people. Consequently, the earliest gay drama took this fact to its logical conclusion and assumed a gay audience. Before this, homosexual drama of the 50s and 60s had assumed a 'straight' audience, authors taking a 'them-and-us' approach, as if homosexuals were a rare breed of animal for the (heterosexual) audience to study. Gay naturalism opted for a middle course. It was generally not written for a completely gay audience and yet it presupposed a supportive and informed response from its spectators.

The authors of gay naturalism achieved critical acclaim. Michael Wilcox was fêted as one of the most promising playwrights of his generation, and Kevin Elyot's Coming Clean won the Samuel Beckett Award for 1982. This proves that homosexual drama had become respectable in literary and theatrical circles, if only of a certain kind; (Noel Greig and Michelene Wandor, for instance, were not honoured in the same way).

Gay naturalism combined stylistic orthodoxy with controversial content, especially in comparison with previous mainstream drama. Sexual behaviour was dealt with frankly and factually, and topics such as male prostitution, hepatitis and cottaging were raised without self-consciousness. Language was blunt and unambiguous, and Coming Clean even contained a couple of simulated sex scenes. The love that dared not speak its name could now be described in graphic detail. This placed these plays firmly within the naturalistic tradition; ever since Zola's novels and Brieux' plays, naturalism had been associated with an explicit, straight-forward attitude towards sex. In a modern 'permissive' society, it seemed, this freedom extended even to gay sex.

The period from 1975 - 1985 also witnessed a boom in the amount of gay drama being produced. It no longer becomes possible to attempt to cover every play with a homosexual element, especially since much of the work occurred in small groups which disappeared after one or two performances. I shall endeavour, therefore, to select what I consider to be the seminal works in this genre in an effort to isolate its distinguishing features. The earliest examples, as so often in gay drama, stem from America and were written as long ago as 1972 and 1974.

Jane Chambers' A Late Snow (1974) is a sympathetic study of the personal lives of a group of gay women. Ellie and Quincey are lovers: Ellie is a college professor in her mid-thirties; Quincey, several years her junior, is a hopeful young writer. Their relationship has never been particularly passionate, and Ellie's feelings for Quincey are ones of deep friendship rather than romantic love.

Ellie has just met Margo, a famous writer in her forties, for whom she feels a strong attraction, but these feelings make her guilty and so she attempts to crush them. Things are further complicated by the arrival of two figures from her past: Peggy, her room-mate at college, with whom she had shared a bashful, teenaged flirtation; and Pat, her ex-lover of five years standing, for whom she still feels great affection. A traumatic night of revelation and readjustment ensues, after which Ellie decides to leave Quincey and begin a new life with Margo.

It is interesting to compare A Late Snow with The Killing Of Sister George, particularly since both plays chart the end of an established lesbian relationship. The contrast between them

captures the difference in attitude that had evolved in less than a decade.

First, A Late Snow was written by a woman, a simple fact which marked a vital advance. Women were no longer willing to accept works written about them by men, but wanted to place their own experiences on stage. The male domination of theatrical institutions, although by no means overthrown, was at least being challenged. Women were starting to carve a niche for themselves in the 'higher' ranks of the theatrical hierarchy, as writers and directors.

Second, the characterisation of A Late Snow is far more subtle than The Killing Of Sister George. Quincey, a young and idealistic writer, lacks self-confidence and yet is brave enough to be open about her sexuality. Pat drinks heavily and revels in her role of gadfly, the person who always says the wrong thing in delicate situations. Margo, a charming, well-organised career-woman, has ceased to find excitement in her work and longs for fresh mental stimulation. Peggy, the prettiest and most eligible girl in college, drifted into the traditional role of housewife and mother. Ellie is the most complex character of all; a contradictory mix of cowardice and courage, sentimentality and ruthlessness, she feels torn between her sense of duty and her desire to live her own life to the full.

Furthermore, each character often contradicts the impression she gives on first entrance. Pat's bossy bluntness could make her the stereotyped butch dyke, but Chambers is careful to show us a gentle, vulnerable side to her personality which prevents

categorisation. Similarly, Quincey's passive exterior reminds one of Childie, but there is a streak of iron beneath it which gives her an extra dimension as a character. She is open about her lesbianism, even when this elicits a hostile response, and at the end of the play she displays a pride and dignity which are sources of great strength. In short, Chambers' characters are rounded human beings; their sexual orientation is not assumed to twist their whole personality into strange shapes.

The difference is essentially one of attitude. Even with the best of intentions, Marcus never seemed able to treat his characters with respect. In contrast, Chambers shows warmth for the women she creates, understands their struggles and respects them as individuals. Again, this underlines the changes that had occurred in just a few years. In the 1960s, audiences had been asked to feel little more than sympathy or merriment. The new gay naturalism demanded more complex reactions. Its multi-faceted characters displayed a wide range of emotions, good and bad, and they therefore drew a more contradictory response from the spectator.

Third, A Late Snow has a political awareness lacking in The Killing of Sister George. Even in what is basically a domestic play, homosexuality is no longer viewed as a purely private concern. A new way of understanding homosexuality - captured in the word 'gay' - means that Ellie and her friends have options that never existed for George and Childie. For instance, they discuss whether to 'come out', an idea which would have been meaningless to the earlier women who had no vision of how to escape from their prison. The arguments in favour of coming out are strongly advanced by Quincey during the course of the play; she

belongs to the generation who saw the birth of GLF. Ellie, ten years her senior, still keeps her lesbianism secret, for she has known the other side of the coin, the world which existed before Gay Liberation, the world to which George and Childie belonged. Ellie explains to Quincey:

> When I was your age, 'lesbian' was a dictionary word used only to frighten teenage girls and parents. Mothers fainted, fathers became violent, landlords evicted you, and nobody would hire you. A lesbian was like a vampire: she looked in the mirror and there was no reflection.[3]

It is small wonder that the world as described here should produce such a negative portrayal of lesbianism as The Killing Of Sister George. It is also clear that once this view of the world was challenged, and homosexuals began to work towards a new role for themselves in society, a fresh drama was bound to evolve, featuring radically different characters.

Ellie and her friends are much less consumed by guilt and self-disgust than George and Childie, who inhabit a world of ignorance and silence with which they have little option other than to collude. The characters of A Late Snow are aware of an alternative, in a society where homosexuality is more visible and the idea of Gay Pride has started to circulate. Life may be a struggle, but they are putting up a good fight, and they never evoke heterosexuality as a magic potion which would put everything right. The Killing Of Sister George places heterosexual marriage on a pedestal; A Late Snow is more realistic, showing both its faults and its advantages through the character of Peggy. Peggy has always known that her husband has affairs, and has even grown to accept this, but the double standard becomes too blatant to

ignore when he accuses her of infidelity and she resolves to leave him. However, by the end of the play, she has chosen to return home because going back is the easier option: 'I have a life there. It's not what I had in mind, but it's mine.'.[4] In the homosexual plays of the 1960s, heterosexual marriage is depicted as a Garden of Eden, the gates of which unfortunate homosexuals can never pass through. In A Late Snow, it has become simply one of the many alternative ways of forming relationships, with its own particular drawbacks and advantages.

Although the political climate in which gay naturalism was born was inspired by GLF, little of the new radicalism occurred on the surface of these plays. There is nothing that could be termed overtly political in A Late Snow other than Quincey's passionate commitment to the idea of coming out. There is no bald polemic and the characters are by no means radical theorists; they act and think differently from their predecessors simply because society has changed. They do not share the pessimistic perspective of the victims of the 1960s and instinctively assume attitudes that are prouder, more positive and more defiant. This is due more to the social atmosphere around them than to any knowledge of gay political theory; they have grown up in a different world.

But perhaps the greatest difference of all between A Late Snow and The Killing Of Sister George, even though it is harder to define, is a contrast in mood and tone. Homosexual drama had always been melodramatic, unfolding in a world of crisis and hysteria where every setback threatened to develop into a catastrophe. In comparison, A Late Snow seems refreshingly calm. Its characters may be undergoing personal crises, but these never

become an excuse for histrionic displays of misery; they are also common, everyday problems and not exotic psychological disorders. Ellie must choose whether to settle for the dull security of life with Quincey or whether to grasp a new beginning which may turn out to be a mirage. In her turn, when Quincey is left alone at the end of the play, she does not rush for the bottle of pills and end it all; she is already making plans for the future and starting to rebuild her life.

Gay naturalism was the product of a new generation of gay playwrights with a different attitude towards homosexuality. Far from viewing it as strange or uncommon, they were aware of its unexciting ordinariness. A Late Snow typifies this mellow approach in dramatising the simple, humdrum truth that life normally goes on. There is no suicide or catastrophe at the end of the play, but a sense of continuing life. Ellie and Margo will aim to make a success of their fresh beginning; Quincey will try to pick up the pieces and start again; Pat will continue ploughing her way through life, aided by the occasional alcoholic binge; Peggy will return to the security of her family and job. The lives of homosexuals do not generally end in suicide, murder, madness or despair; gay people accommodate to reality.

Despite the fact that A Late Snow anticipated later drama, it never became a well-known play and it is worth a brief examination of the reasons why. Some are undoubtedly artistic. The play is rather old-fashioned, written in the mix of realism and symbolism which Ibsen and Chekhov perfected a century ago, and the symbolism shot through the play seems clumsy at times. The central symbol,

the final snowfall of winter before the release of spring, reflecting the thawing of Ellie's frozen feelings, is awkwardly integrated into the naturalistic framework. The care with which realistic reasons are supplied to explain why all five characters appear in the same place at the same time seems somewhat contrived in an age of more fluid dramatic construction. The play is well-written, but scarcely stunning enough to stand out from other competent pieces of naturalism in the contemporary theatre.

However, there are almost certainly reasons other than aesthetic for the neglect the play has suffered. (Interestingly, I have been unable to track down a single review of the play.) Audiences felt secure when offered stereotypes, because they were being presented with a familiar world which reinforced their preconceived ideas. The ordinary, dignified lesbians of A Late Snow were threatening to many people, because they could not be pigeonholed into existing compartments or even be separated from heterosexuals in any way other than their sexual behaviour. The boundaries between gay and straight were blurred, whereas the plays of the 1960s reinforced those boundaries even as they advocated sympathy and tolerance.

A Late Snow may have been a highly orthodox play, but it was still ahead of its time. Mainstream theatres were not yet ready for plays which dealt with homosexuality in a serious, unsensationalised way, and actors felt uneasy about portraying themselves as homosexual, especially in a manner which avoided caricature. On the other hand, the play lacked the up-front political commitment which would have made it acceptable to groups formed by gay activists. In addition, A Late Snow was a lesbian work and was therefore less

likely to interest male-dominated theatre managements. These have always been suspicious of anything that might be labelled a 'woman's play' and probably believed there was more of a market for male gay drama.

Martin Sherman's Passing By (1972) is a gentle play charting the brief relationship between two young men, Toby and Simon. It begins with their first meeting in a cinema and ends with Toby leaving for Paris while Simon takes over his apartment in New York. During the play, they both go down with hepatitis and have to spend two months recuperating in Toby's apartment. Passing By is a romantic comedy which looks forward to gay naturalism, sketching the relationship between Toby and Simon with humour and warmth.

Sherman explained that he 'hoped to create a gentle, romantic and loving encounter between two men, in which their gayness was simply a fact - completely easy and open and never a problem.'.[5] The finished product was a play not unlike those of Neil Simon in its urbanity, its lightness of touch and its wry, sophisticated humour. However, this should not obscure the fact that such a play marked a significant departure in 1972, when other homosexual characters were still weeping and slashing their wrists. Passing By was innovative in that it failed to conceive of homosexuality as a problem; as Sherman said 'their gayness was simply a fact'.[6]

The heart of Passing By lies in the richness of the characterisation of the two young men. Toby is very much a New Yorker, an edgy individual who lives on his nerves and phones the doctor when he gets a splinter in his foot. He dreams of becoming

a famous painter and has just been awarded a grant to study art in Paris for three months. He has a New Yorker's sharp sense of humour which keeps him sane in the city's crazy bustle and helps him to endure his years of artistic obscurity.

Simon is an ex-Olympics diver who is now trying to become a radio sports commentator. He is extremely health-conscious, a fact reflected in the athletic body he has built through a strict regime of swimming, weight-training and diet. He has known only success, and is ill-equipped to cope with the double disappointment of failing his interview and falling seriously ill for the first time. He finds it difficult to adjust to failure and can only let his repressed insecurities come to the surface when he gets drunk. In his inebriated state, he realises that people have been warm and friendly towards a perfect shell and not his real self:

> ... they're really not friends. I mean, I'm a wonderful body, with a medal on it, and I have a perfect tan on my wonderful body, and you can eat out on that for years in Florida ... [7]

However, there is nothing beneath this marvellous exterior:

> ... I didn't know who I was, because, like I say, I'm not real. You're real. Lots of people are real. But I'm not, and I don't understand how you become real. [8]

Lonely and vulnerable on his first visit to New York, Simon feels drawn towards Toby, who 'made [him] feel real ... treated [him] real'.[9] By the time they have both recovered from hepatitis, their casual relationship has become more serious; Simon asks Toby to cancel his trip to Paris and to stay with him in New York.

But both men realise that they have independent careers to pursue and would only blame the other for holding them back. They part on friendly terms, arranging to see each other again when Toby returns from France.

Passing By is a charming, witty, well-written play, but one which would hardly have been revolutionary had it featured a heterosexual couple. Sherman's innovation consists of treating a gay couple as any romantic comedy would two heterosexuals. There may be some evidence of GLF thinking in its ending, which rejects the traditional happy-ever-after of permanent liaison for an open-ended commitment of continued friendship, but the play's style belongs to the genre of American romantic comedy.

Passing By was first produced in Britain by Gay Sweatshop in 1975. In an introduction to the text, Sherman explains the difficulty he had finding actors willing to play the parts in his home country:

> the reluctance of interesting young American actors to play 'happy' homosexuals. They were quite willing to limp their wrists onstage, indeed even to cut them - that constituted 'character' playing. Anything free and natural was thought to be a threat to future employment.[10]

A few years on, this seems bizarre. At the time, it was the height of radicalism to portray homosexuals as ordinary people and this could only occur in an environment on the edge of the Fringe.

Sadly, the significance of Passing By has changed with the passage of time. The spread of AIDS has given the play a sinister edge which it was never intended to have. Sherman personally

cancelled a New York production in 1983:

> for fear that the tragic AIDS epidemic raging through New York would throw the story of two men who happen to contract hepatitis into a completely misleading light and fan some of the misconceived and prejudiced linkage of homosexuality and physical illness that was then popular in the American press. "

This is a sad loss: Passing By glows with a gentle warmth rare in gay drama, and very few gay works approach anything like its delightful lightness of touch.

Just how rapidly things changed in the late seventies is evidenced by the different situation facing Rents by Michael Wilcox, first performed at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, in 1979. The ideas behind Gay Liberation had spread, reaching a wider population and creating a new gay audience of people whose lives had developed against a background of GLF thinking. These people were keen to see their own lives represented on stage in a truthful way. The relaxation of stage censorship had led to a bolder theatre willing to tackle what were once taboo subjects. Homosexuality was discussed more in public and audiences were now willing to face topics like male prostitution, the subject at the heart of Wilcox's Rents.

Rents is very much a product of the stage naturalism which evolved in Britain during the 1970s, a style heavily influenced by television and the studio spaces used for performance. The old realism of solid, well-made plays in solid, well-made sets gave way to a looser construction of short scenes suitable for acting on small, bare stages.

There is no place for polemics in the new naturalism, so Rents has no mention of politics or gay rights. The attitude Wilcox takes towards his characters is supportive but neutral; they are respected as individuals but are neither criticised nor admired on account of their sexual orientation. As Nicholas de Jongh wrote in The Guardian, 'The characters are all gay, but sexuality never fully defines or explains their personalities and problems.'[12]. Certain asssumptions are built into Wilcox's script - that homosexuality is not abnormal or extraordinary, that gay characters should be treated in the same way as straight characters - but he makes no direct attempt to change the viewer's opinions.

As with the other plays in this chapter, Rents is built on strength of characterisation. The three main characters - the rent boys, Phil and Robert, and the college lecturer, Richard - are given the psychological complexity of people encountered in real life. Even when the play breaks out of its naturalistic mould and uses devices such as soliloquy and direct address, their characterisation remains intact. Hence there is no place in the play for either stereotyping or class representation.

The plot of Rents has the inconsequential drift of events in real life. There is some sense of a beginning and an end - the play begins when Richard travels up to Edinburgh to do some temporary lecturing and finishes when he returns to Newcastle - and yet the overall impression is of a flow of events which has no fixed starting-point and no final conclusion. The play feels less like a crafted story than a slice of action pulled at random from real life. Verisimilitude lies at the very heart of Rents, acting as the play's modus operandi, despite its use of stylised devices

which shatter the fourth wall. It is just that the sense of reality which the play both builds up and relies on is reached through careful characterisation. Of necessity, sexuality must become a relatively minor factor in this greater complexity of character.

Rents is much less convincing when it abandons this basic realism. Through the play, a parallel is drawn between the rent boys, Phil and Robert, and the two tramps in Beckett's Waiting For Godot. But this never feels anything other than contrived and derivative, and is a clumsy attempt at universality in what works best as a concrete piece of drama. Like all naturalism, when gay naturalism breaks out of its realistic mould it risks sacrificing its essential credibility.

There is no attempt at universal symbolism in Accounts, written by Wilcox in 1981. Apart from this, though, the play is set in the same mould, with short, cinematic scenes, realistic characterisation and a fluid plot which drifts from one scene to the next, its careful construction hidden behind a seemingly haphazard flow of events. Accounts is also a slice-of-life, even if the slice is taken from what seems like a different planet. Again it is a harsh place, but for other reasons: Rents is about surviving on the seedy streets of inner-city Edinburgh; Accounts follows the elemental struggle to make ends meet facing people on a farm in the Scottish borders.

As a play with a rural setting, Accounts is a rarity in modern drama, particularly in gay drama. The modern gay scene has evolved in urban centres which allowed a degree of anonymity. Homosexual theatre has always reflected this urban background, placing its

characters in city environments.

The rural world of Accounts portrays a completely different social structure. The family is still vitally important, both as an emotional and an economic unit, in a harsh world where collective action is necessary to eke out a living. Therefore, Accounts, unlike most gay drama, is based around a family unit; it shows two brothers and their mother struggling to survive economically after their father's death.

In the quiet solitude of rural Britain, a world without gay bars or gay groups, homosexual behaviour has to occur in secret. Wilcox's play implies, but never states, that Donald has had a secret sexual relationship with James, a friend of the family. No word for 'homosexual', though, is ever used in the play, as if two boys who have been brought up in such isolation have no concept of homosexuality. When Donald tells his brother about his sexual feelings, he can only do so elliptically, using sheep as metaphor: 'More interested in tups than yows just now like ...'.[v3]

Yet his brother's reaction is not the horror one might predict, but a calm and immediate acceptance of the fact. The two boys are too close to each other, having spent years together on their lonely farm, so Donald cannot suddenly become a new label, a 'homosexual', even if Andy is aware of the term. Their mutual reliance and love has created a bond which makes this impossible. If Wilcox's play reflects rural attitudes to homosexual behaviour in an accurate way (and I admit to doubts) it surely depicts attitudes which have existed unchanged for centuries but are finally succumbing to the urbanising influence of television and the mass media. It is hard to believe that there are young people in Britain so innocent

of mass culture that they do not use words like 'gay' or know about homosexuality.

Sexuality plays a less central role in Accounts than in Rents. Donald's discovery of his sexual feelings forms only one strand of the plot, of equal significance to his brother's affair with a married woman. Both are less crucial than the problem of economic survival, the difficulties of balancing financial accounts. Wilcox's play is essentially a naturalistic impression of rural life which contains an unexpected homosexual element, and not a 'gay play'.

So Accounts is far more circumspect about sexual behaviour than Rents, having none of its blunt language and straight-forward description. To Edinburgh's seasoned rent boys, sex is a mechanical function which is discussed openly, without embarrassment or fuss. To the two brothers on their border farm, sex is rarely divorced from personal feelings in this way. It never takes place with strangers and therefore always carries emotional meaning. Reflecting the more conservative world which it portrays, Accounts is far more discreet in its treatment of sexuality.

Accounts was first performed in 1981 at the Traverse, transferring from there to the Edinburgh Festival and the Riverside Studios. It has been broadcast on BBC radio and filmed by Channel Four television, and was a joint winner of The George Devine Award. Clearly, Accounts has been a highly successful play. This raises the suspicion that a play in which homosexuality is treated obliquely is viewed more favourably than one which treats sexuality with graphic realism. It is doubtful whether Accounts would have achieved such a comprehensive success in all media if it were as

frank as Rents or our next play, Coming Clean.

Kevin Elyot's Coming Clean (1984) takes place in the familiar surroundings of a 'first-floor flat in Kentish Town'.[14] Its characters, too, are more typical of those in modern gay drama. Tony and Greg, an affair of five years standing, are a couple of urban gay men sharing an open relationship. They are free to sleep with whom they wish, although they have an understanding that these flings must remain casual so that their central relationship will not be threatened. Their best friend, William, is an outrageous queen bubbling with camp humour who lives life to the full on London's gay scene. The play is firmly rooted in the modern metropolis and it is difficult to imagine these sophisticated characters existing anywhere else.

The narrative is extremely simple. At the start of the play, the two men's relationship is under strain for many reasons, particularly sexual boredom and career frustration. This fragile situation is tipped over the edge when they hire a house-boy to keep their flat tidy. Greg and the house-boy fall in love, which breaks the rules of the relationship (although one-night-stands are permitted, longer affairs are not). Tony and Greg are then forced to face up to the way their relationship has slowly deteriorated over the years and the play ends with Tony moving out of the flat.

Gay drama has often explored different ways of forming sexual relationships. For instance, the difficulties of rejecting monogamy for open relationships was a vital strand in Gay Sweatshop's work. Their attitude, however, was partisan; open relationships were

advocated as the only truthful way for people to relate, whatever the difficulties they posed. Elyot is far more neutral, a detached reporter rather than a participant. Coming Clean gives the spectator no explicit moral directive.

Yet it cannot be said to lack political awareness. As with most gay naturalism, politics is raised only tangentially, but the legacy of GLF is plain to see. For instance, it seems reasonable to adduce authorial criticism of Tony and Greg for not achieving a genuinely open relationship. They may have integrated the occasional sexual fling into their lifestyle but have never begun to address the far deeper problem of how to have more than one intense relationship at the same time. Emotionally, they have remained monogamous, and their fragile understanding cracks under the pressure placed on it by Greg's affair. Both men admit to feeling tremendous jealousy when the other is unfaithful; they seem unwilling to settle for sexual monogamy and yet unable to come to terms with any alternative. Coming Clean makes this a political issue to the extent that the characters are aware of the sexual politics involved and themselves view it partly in these terms.

Coming Clean attracted some controversy on account of its blunt sexual content. Like Rents, the play contains explicit language and crude sexual humour - William says that a one-night-stand was so loose he 'expected to find half of London up there'.[15] Elyot's distinction was to move beyond words to pictures: the stage performance included two scenes of simulated gay sex. In the first, Tony sits between Greg's legs and 'opens his robe slightly and begins to blow him off'.[16] In the second, Robert kneels over a cushion and positions himself ready to be fucked by Greg, until

Tony's unexpected return interrupts their love-making. These scenes underline the astonishing changes which had taken place in less than twenty years; after all, John Osborne had been unable to place two men in the same bed together in A Patriot For Me.

Yet this daring content takes place within the most orthodox of frameworks. Coming Clean may break new ground by placing gay love - and gay sex - centre-stage, but in other ways it is a very conventional piece of writing: The Telegraph reviewer called it 'only another jangle on the old tri-angle'.[17] Elyot's play is another slice-of-life, one which mirrors the young, urban gay men who probably constituted the bulk of its audience. As with most gay naturalism, the plot is ostensibly rather shapeless, the characterisation realistic, the language prosaic. It is now time to explore how far this type of play can transcend the limitations imposed by its form.

The plays covered in this chapter might be called a mature form of gay drama. Their characters are more subtle and contradictory than those of earlier drama and the plays present a sophisticated view of homosexuality. Each post-war period spawned a drama in its own image. The tragi-comedies of the 1960s reflected the liberal thrust towards decriminalisation. The political theatre of the 1970s acted as a direct voice for Gay Liberation. Gay naturalism, in its turn, grew out of a society in which (male) homosexuality was slowly becoming integrated into mainstream life.

The decade from 1975 to 1985 saw a huge expansion of the gay scene. Most medium-sized towns now boasted a gay pub, and a large city like London had developed an extensive network of gay meeting

places. There were gay newspapers, bookshops, social groups, meeting centres and a plethora of societies catering for interests as diverse as train-spotting and contract bridge. This created a 'pink economy' of night clubs, restaurants, travel agencies, boutiques, clothes manufacturers and dating bureaux serving the lucrative male gay market. Pop-stars, actors and writers spoke openly on TV about their homosexuality, forcing the general public to revise its perception of a gay man. Gay naturalism emerged in response to this fresh situation, offering a realistic glimpse into the social and domestic lives of gay people in the post-Stonewall world.

The days of overtly political gay drama seemed over. Many felt that the new plays, with their subtlety and complexity, represented a quantum leap in homosexual theatre because of their honesty and realism. Michael Wilcox himself, in his introduction to Gay Plays, complains that 'political considerations seem to smother the more durable, dramatic instincts of most of the playwrights'.[18] He expresses a desire to 'encourage writers who wish to portray homosexual characters to do so without any special pleading for the way they have been programmed sexually, and also to remember that in the theatre, as in everyday life, a person's sexual inclinations are only a part of a much greater complexity of character.'.[19] The drama of the future, it would seem, will have no need for plays 'about' homosexuality.

A few years on, this seems overly optimistic. The advent of AIDS has reversed what seemed like an inevitable drift towards integration. A hostile Conservative government and a shrill and reactionary gutter press have added their weight to recent anti-gay

feeling. There are signs (as will be made clear later) that gay theatre is again becoming more political in response to this, taking on board struggles which cannot be adequately voiced through realistic drama.

This is not to deny the achievements of gay naturalism, especially in the field of characterisation. The genre portrayed gay people with more truth, subtlety and depth than any other. Furthermore, it created a wider variety of characters, as even the small sample in this chapter makes clear. Urban, rural, working-class, middle-class, sophisticated, naive; gay naturalism broke the old moulds and made its characters into real individuals.

The work created in this genre was also highly accessible to a wide range of people. Writing in the dominant theatrical style of their age, authors were able to cover controversial material without exciting too much outrage. Few of the reviews found anything to complain about in either Rents or Coming Clean despite their graphic sexual content. (One notable exception was Milton Shulman in The Evening Standard who stated that Rents 'needs an audience of open minds and strong stomachs to appreciate its revelations of gay promiscuity'[20] and called its characters 'these unsavoury people'.)[21] Audiences, gay or straight, watching characters talk, eat, drink, work, make love, could no longer compartmentalise them into a different species. Human similarity over-rode sexual variety.

However, gay naturalism also had severe limitations, stemming from the tendency of dramatic realism to uphold the status quo. This is due less to a deliberate desire to be conservative - on the contrary, many naturalistic writers have felt strong political

convictions - than to a conservativism intrinsic to the realistic form. The aim of naturalism is to mirror real life as faithfully as possible; artistic excellence therefore becomes the ability to mimic reality successfully. In the process, art loses a consciously moral dimension. The writer whose work comes closest to copying reality is the best playwright; the moral artist who strays into the realm of what ought to be is violating accepted artistic standards. Furthermore, too much directly polemical material risks shattering the invisible fourth wall. Also, any political statements that are made in a realistic play are likely to become confused behind the welter of detail which is their stock in trade.

Realistic characterisation was the foundation-stone of gay naturalism. Wilcox sees it as basic to the stage: 'in the theatre, as in everyday life, a person's sexual inclinations are only a part of a much greater complexity of character'.[22] But complex characters in a Stanislavskian sense are peculiar to the present century, and even there the finest authors have rejected them. The characters in gay naturalism may have been more accurate, in the sense that they were more like people one might meet in real life, but this did not automatically make them more true in an aesthetic sense.

Naturalism can easily slide into triviality. Gay characters doing ordinary things in an ordinary way may mark an advance on the days when they lisped and minced, but it is difficult for an author to use them to speak in general terms. While seeming to be neutral, gay naturalism also had its own bias. Certain groups were under-represented (lesbians, blacks, Asians, the working-class) whilst others were in danger of becoming new cliches (sophisticated,

middle-class men with flats in London).

It is also questionable whether gay naturalism marked the artistic advance that Wilcox seemed to assume. Its products were clearly regarded more highly than those of other genres - they won literary prizes - but this may have been due to artistic orthodoxy rather than to intrinsic merit. Good drama needs more than intricate characterisation and dialogue one might hear at a bus-stop, and future generations may not share current assumptions that Rents and Coming Clean are more dramatic than As Time Goes By or Care and Control. Gay naturalism has reached its limits and faces a simple question: where can it go now that it has shown gays as ordinary people doing ordinary things? In essence, this is an undramatic aim.

Coming Clean provides a perfect example of the limits of gay naturalism. It relied heavily for effect on the daring nature of its sex scenes, but once these are removed, or can no longer shock anyone, the play seems rather dull. Stripped of its novelty value, it becomes obvious that the play is a thoroughly conventional, rather twee piece about the heartbreaks of romantic love.

It is interesting that even most of the reviewers of the time were not blinded to the play's faults simply by its homosexual content. Although John Elsom, in The Mail on Sunday, felt that

'in time, it will be recognised as the first mature play about homosexuality'[23], he was in a decided minority. Irving Wardle, in The Times, was far less complimentary:

> I resent the force of the Gay Lib movement in getting stage space for plays that would stand no chance whatever if they featured triangles of debs and stock-brokers. Mr Elyot's chart of "contemporary sexual mores" takes you straight back to the world of commercially packaged sex comedy.[24]

Charles Spencer, of The Evening Standard, was even more biting, mocking the play for its corny romantic dialogue and stating:

> The one thing which distinguishes Elyot's play from the mawkish love stories so beloved by editors of women's magazines is that all the characters are men. [25]

Virtually every reviewer agreed on one thing, though: that the best lines in the play came from William, the sharp-tongued queen, who bubbled with dramatic vitality compared to the other three serious and self-indulgent characters. The screaming queen may be suspect politically, but no-one can deny his supreme theatricality.

The artistic questions about gay naturalism have a political parallel: integration or radicalism? Should homosexuals integrate themselves into society or should they be challenging the entire fabric of that society? Is the pink economy a hidden threat which knocks the edge off gay radicalism, or does it mark a genuine improvement in the daily lives of gay people? In the theatre, do plays written in orthodox naturalism, performed at The Bush and The Gate, mark the acceptance of gay drama as a theatrical form or do they represent a betrayal, a sell-out?

The success of gay naturalism cannot be denied. It has reached a large audience, earned gay authors previously unknown respect and created a mature, rational, rich form of drama. It has dealt with sexuality frankly, without becoming sensationalistic, and has even breached the mighty barriers surrounding TV and radio. Nevertheless, it has tended to present the status quo as inevitable and has made no attempt to suggest how things might be improved. As an anti-gay backlash gathers strength, feeding off the tragedy

of AIDS, gay authors may feel that they have to abandon naturalism for forms which can again make a clear political statement.

The negative stereotypes of the 1960s are no longer taken seriously, having been debunked by both genderfuck theatre and gay naturalism. These two dramatic forms are now, in their turn, becoming history. Genderfuck theatre already seems a spent force, although its effects can be discerned in a host of mainstream shows. Gay naturalism promises to have a longer shelf-life, especially on TV and radio, as long as its sexual content does not become too outspoken.

For gay theatre (or, at least, theatre about gay men) has invaded the West End over the last ten years; what was confined to the Fringe has spilt over onto Shaftesbury Avenue, local rep., television and radio. Gay naturalism greatly assisted this process by making gay theatre accessible to lots of people. Whatever its artistic and political limitations, it has placed gay men in the centre of a stage where they are clearly visible to all.

SECTION 5

GAY THEATRE IN THE 1980s

INTRODUCTION

Modern British theatre tends to operate a system whereby innovation occurs on the Fringe and gradually filters through to the West End. This is true on both a stylistic and a thematic level. In smaller venues like The Bush, The Gate, The Royal Court Theatre Upstairs and The Half Moon, controversial issues are presented to supportive audiences. Work of quality then often transfers from there to theatres in the West End where it reaches a much larger and more varied audience.

This process happened rapidly to gay theatre. In 1975, Gay Sweatshop broke new ground when they created the first 'gay plays'. Less than five years later, plays with a homosexual theme were being staged on the West End and registering a huge success.

Gay work reached the mass media through the same process. Film has often been more adventurous than theatre in tackling contentious subjects, so many homosexual plays, even of the two previous decades, had quickly made the transition to celluloid. Television and radio had been much more conservative, but even they moved with the times and gay characters emerged in the most traditional of TV genre such as sitcom and soap opera. It must have seemed to many gay people in the early 1980s that a major breakthrough was imminent.

However, there was a price to pay for this advance: subject-matter often became diluted to make it acceptable to a mass audience. The drama lost some of its bite and no longer tackled thorny issues of special interest to gay people. Sometimes the sexuality got

taken out of homosexuality, the gayness of the characters on stage became theoretical more than actual. Also, in reaching a wider audience, mass gay drama often sacrificed its community appeal, losing its special function as a voice by and for a particular minority. Finally, the integration of gay drama into the West End and the mass media left out gay women altogether. Lesbianism remained as hidden as it had been twenty years earlier.

This had the effect of pushing many artists further and further out to the edges of the Fringe. Community-based theatre, sexually-charged theatre, politicised theatre, lesbian theatre, drifted away from what had become a sort of gay mainstream to plough its own furrows in less populated fields. A two-tier system of gay drama emerged during the 1980s whereby some gay plays became tremendously successful and popular and vied for critical awards, whilst others languished in obscurity, often supported by only a handful of individuals. A channel still existed between the two worlds, but it became increasingly difficult to leap from one to the other.

This section, then, covers a vast range of work. At one extreme, we find plays in which homosexuality is made as acceptable as possible to a mass audience; at the other, highly experimental shows which propound views which most people would consider to be outlandish.

11. GAY MEN, DARLINGS OF THE WEST END

West End theatre had seemed an unlikely place for plays with gay characters and yet the revolution begun by Gay Sweatshop had penetrated the very heart of this conservative establishment within a few years. One smash hit followed another through the 1980s: Privates On Parade, Bent, The Dresser, Deathtrap, Another Country, A Patriot For Me, La Cage Aux Folles, Torch Song Trilogy, Breaking The Code.

Clearly, it is no exaggeration to say that the Gay Liberation Front had changed society. The ideas of GLF possessed a potency which swept beyond the confines of the radical Left and transformed the way many people perceived homosexuality. In the process, an audience was created for gay theatre, some homosexual, some heterosexual, but all relaxed enough about their own sexuality to go to a performance of a play with a homosexual element.

Of course, the plays which made it to the West End were far removed from those of Gay Sweatshop, whose purist socialism did not appeal to the middle-class audiences of mainstream theatre. Writers struck a dramatic compromise, taking on board the advances achieved by Sweatshop but modifying the militancy of their politics.

All of the plays covered in this chapter earned their authors critical praise and box-office success. Gay Liberation had left its mark on each of them (distinguishing them from earlier mainstream offerings like Staircase) but each play also bore elements which made it accessible to mixed (gay/straight) audiences. One such play - Martin Sherman's Bent - will be analysed in depth. More

than any other, this magnificent play strides the two worlds, mixing the political intensity of gay activism with the slick professionalism demanded by West End audiences.

Sherman could hardly have suspected that he had written a major Broadway and West End success on completing Bent. His play seemed tailored and destined for the American fringe. A story of the internment and extermination of homosexuals by the Nazi regime, Bent builds up a pitch of dramatic intensity which seems quint-essentially American. In total contrast with Sweatshop's work, it encourages complete emotional involvement in the audience; watching the play is a traumatic experience. The ideas of gay politics are hidden beneath the surface of the play, which has all the passion of Eugene O'Neill or Tennessee Williams.

Sherman lulls the audience into a false sense of calm by making his very first scene as light and bubbly as drawing-room comedy. Rudy and Max bicker and chat; Rudy seems yet another camp gay stereotype. Suddenly, a coup de théâtre shatters the flippant mood: the knocking at the door turns out to be two Nazi officials. The previous evening has been The Night of the Long Knives and the Nazis are rounding up all the homosexuals in Berlin.

The casual opening scene of Bent is extremely effective theatrically, but also does considerably more than enable a striking dramatic entrance to occur: it suggests reasons why the Nazis were able to turn Germany into a Fascist state. Max lives an escapist life of cocooned debauchery in Berlin's homosexual clubs, getting wildly drunk, snorting cocaine and picking up partners for quick sex. He neither knows nor cares about the political situation in

Germany outside of this ghetto and has his own fair share of prejudices. For instance, he is very uncomplimentary about his landlord solely because the man is Jewish.

The Nazi barbarity towards homosexuals did not emerge ex nihilo. Sherman carefully chooses scenes which point out the prejudice which already existed in Germany and which the Nazis exploited. The word used to describe homosexuals, for example, is 'queer' and homosexuals even use it of themselves. Heterosexuals are 'normals' and homosexuals are 'fluffs'. Max's uncle, Freddie, holds typical views: 'Why couldn't you have been quiet about it? Settled down, got married, paid for a few boys on the side. No one would have known.'.[1]

There is a strict hierarchy of power, even in the concentration camp. At the bottom of the pile comes the 'queer', the person who wears the pink triangle. The Nazis merely took this prejudice to its terrible conclusion and converted social ostracism into mass slaughter.

At the root of Germany's homophobia (and, Sherman suggests, our own) lies a profound fear of loving contact between two men. Max only enjoys sex which is mingled with violence. The Nazis sublimate their homo-erotic feelings into campfire gatherings in the Hitler Youth. Max must suck off a Nazi Captain in order to get medicine, but the Captain will only do it with someone who is labelled a Jew: 'But not a queer. That would mean maybe he was a queer.'.[2] Rudy, the only person brave enough to reject this emotional rigidity, is destroyed on account of his gentleness.

The entire second act of Bent takes place behind the barbed wire of a concentration camp where Max and another prisoner, Horst, spend their days moving rocks from one pile to another and back

again. They are forbidden to touch and can only speak as they pass in their ceaseless toil of carrying rocks. Yet, even under this severe oppression, a relationship builds up between them. Their suffering brings them close together and they fall in love.

This love is 'consummated' in an extraordinary scene during which they make love to each other without physical contact. Every time a bell rings, prisoners are allowed a rest period of three minutes during which they must stand to attention. Unable to touch, Max and Horst caress each other with language for these three minutes until they achieve orgasm. The most brutal repression imaginable has failed to extinguish the flames of gay love:

> We did it - fucking guards, fucking camp - we did it! They're not going to kill us. We made love. We were real. We were human. We made love.[3]

Having beaten the system in the only way possible, Max and Horst cannot long savour their victory. The guards at the camp have a 'game' which they play when they want to dispose of one of the prisoners: they order him to throw his hat against the electric fence and then make him go to collect it. The Captain now suspects the truth - that Max has sucked him off in order to buy medicine for Horst - and takes his revenge, forcing Max to watch as he puts Horst through this routine. When told to fetch his hat, Horst charges at the Captain and is shot dead. The Captain orders Max to put Horst's body in the pit where other dead prisoners are thrown.

But Max makes a final act of defiance. Until that point, he has been posing as a Jew in order to avoid the stigma of being labelled with the worse brand of homosexual. But now he dons the coat Horst has been wearing, the coat with the pink triangle that

brands him as 'queer', and charges into the electric fence. This may be the traditional gay ending of suicide, but it signals an act of freedom rather than an admittance of defeat. Sherman has prepared the ground for this earlier in the play by making it clear that the Nazis dislike suicides because the act is a final gesture of free will, a refusal to be ground down by the camp's inhumanity. Even in death, Max and Horst achieve a form of triumph, having risen above the horrors surrounding them.

Bent is uncompromisingly positive. It draws gay feelings as natural and beautiful, sources of strength which overcome the vilest oppression. It does not depict these feelings in the abstract, stripped of sexual content; the love it champions is unashamedly physical, as the scene where Max and Horst make verbal love clearly demonstrates. Therefore, audiences are not allowed the escape-route of sympathising with homosexuals as long as they do not have to think too closely about the physical realities of gay love. Gay sex, as well as gay love, is being idealised.

Bent aims to reclaim history for a hidden group of people: the homosexuals who died in Nazi gas chambers. This is a similar motive to that which inspired As Time Goes By but Sherman's technique is quite unlike Sweatshop's Brechtian distancing. Bent is a hugely emotional play, which has important implications when staging the text. At the Criterion Theatre in London, the audience were handed a leaflet about the Nazi regime in Germany and the way gay people were persecuted there. This helped Bent to succeed on a political level, for without historical documentation audiences might have treated the play as a nightmarish fantasy. The play's immense power would still have gripped them, but they may have dissociated

events on stage from reality or assumed that the playwright was exaggerating the truth. The facts about what happened in Nazi Germany written down in the programme proved that the reality was even worse. If Bent were set in an imaginary country, it would seem too far-fetched to ring true; like much of what happened under the Nazi regime it is almost impossible to present dramatically because the reality is so atrocious that it becomes unreal. If Bent reclaims history, it also relies on it.

Bent is a hard-hitting play which makes few compromises. Its outlook stems from GLF thinking, with its politicised approach, its frank treatment of sexuality, its sense of gay history and its unequivocal support for its gay characters. It may seem strange that such an uncompromising piece of drama should find a home on Broadway and the West End and achieve such a resounding success there. Some attempt must be made to explain why.

In general, the politics of the West End might be described as liberal (in the modern sense of the word) and it can be argued that this description also fits Bent. The values that Bent champions - tolerance, fairness, freedom, equality, compassion - are the values of humanistic liberal thinking. Modern liberalism tries to see issues from all angles, to be fair to all concerned; Bent shares this concern with fairness. It is certainly more balanced and richer in texture than any of the texts of Gay Sweatshop.

Max is no blue-eyed angel of high moral fibre representing the gay cause; such a person had an extremely short life expectancy in Nazi Germany. In order to stay alive, Max has to remain quiet while he hears his lover being beaten and killed, to join in the

group rape of a young girl and to pretend to be Jewish in order to avoid the ultimate stigma of being labelled 'queer'. Max is a fully-rounded, flawed character, more like a hero from Ibsen or Miller than a spokesperson from an agit-prop drama.

This enables Sherman to display hugely broad sympathies. Take, for instance, the detail of the Nazi Captain whom Max has to suck off in order to get medicine. There were homosexual Nazis, Sherman seems to be saying, and they also deserve our sympathy and understanding. Such wide-ranging tolerance is arguably dangerous, but Sherman's broad compassion did enable him to reach a market hostile to the hard-lined socialism of Gay Sweatshop.

Bent stands much closer to the mainstream of modern theatre in stylistic terms. Sherman plainly belongs to an American tradition which relies on arousing intense feelings through emotional identification. Bent has rounded characters, a linear plot, heart-stopping climaxes and unashamedly theatrical effects. If it occasionally borders on emotionalism, threatening to tug a little too hard on the heart-strings, its tight structure and sparse language steer it well clear of the pit of melodrama.

Sherman's use of simple theatrical effects is little short of brilliant. He lures his audience into the play by the drawing-room patter of the first scene, guiding them with a gentle hand into his Chamber of Horrors. For all its sophisticated structure, there are several moments of pure theatre in Bent: the dramatic first entry of the Nazis; Rudy's screams as he is tortured off-stage; Max's final suicide against the sparkling, crackling electric fence.

Bent's West End success can be explained by its breadth of

outlook and its cathartic emotional content, not to mention the sheer quality of Sherman's writing. The playwright uses clipped, repetitive language to stunning effect, building up unendurable tension through its tightly-controlled structure. This structural tautness is decorated by a sprinkling of big theatrical moments, splashes of colour against a grey background. Finally, the performance of Bent was greatly helped by the efforts of two of the most talented actors available, Ian McKellen and Tom Bell. Bent's roots were firmly in gay activism but its quality and breadth would ensure its success on almost any stage.

Peter Nichols' Privates On Parade (1977) is a hotpotch of a play which borrows from a wide range of theatrical styles: musical revue, pantomime, naturalism, Brechtian alienation, Chinese opera. It follows the British Song And Dance Unit, South-East Asia, as they entertain the troops in Singapore and Malaya. The Second World War is over and the Cold War has begun, with capitalism and communism fighting it out for the soul of South-East Asia.

The play has two homosexual characters, Acting Captain Terri Dennis and Lance Corporal Charles Bishop, and one character who enjoys a homosexual relationship while on tour but has a wife back in England. Captain Terri Dennis is a stereotyped queen: he calls everyone by feminine nicknames, is sexually promiscuous, quips an endless stream of camp jokes and flamboyantly advertises his homosexuality. He has learnt to protect himself from the world by a shield of camp, flippant cynicism. He has come to terms with himself and his lifestyle and refuses to hide or tone down his homosexuality.

Charles provides a dramatic foil, for he is a gentle, sensitive ex-nurse who delights in fussing over the health of the regiment. He is much less happy about his sexual orientation and, although he indulges in the gay patois, calling his colleagues 'Erica' and 'Sweetheart', his real feelings come out when he says:

> What's gay about it? Most men like women and most women like men. We're queer, Terri, queer as coots. And I don't think we should flaunt this cruel trick of nature. [4]

Terri and Charles are two familiar characters in gay drama: the outrageous queen and the tortured, sensitive soul.

The third character, Corporal Len Bonny, cannot really be called homosexual:

> He's easy. He's got a wife in Blighty. But he likes to be looked after. [5]

Len is a less traditional figure than Terri or Charles, for he is an aggressive, foul-mouthed, insensitive bloke from Birmingham. Nichols realises that not all men who have homosexual experience are effeminate and that human sexuality cannot always be slotted into neat compartments. However, it is worth pointing out that the character who is not 'really' gay (i.e., the one who is married and behaves heterosexually in a civilian environment) is the one who breaks the mould, and that the play's exclusive homosexuals display all the traditional signs of faggotry. Therefore, even though the play rejects stereotyping at its most blatant, it still suggests a link between effeminacy and exclusive male homosexuality.

Nichols' attitude towards homosexuality seems rather confused; in ways reactionary, in ways supportive. It is hard not to conclude

that gayness has been introduced into Privates On Parade for a few quick laughs, since it contains a predictable stream of jokes about make-up, fairy queens and handbags. These quips are put in to Terri's mouth, and therefore become self-irony, but they could hardly be described as sparkling wit and rely on prejudice for their laughter. They have the effect of under-cutting the sympathy which Nichols tries to elicit elsewhere, for exploiting prejudice is a subtle form of endorsement.

This is not to suggest that any such effect was deliberate on Nichols' part. Terri is undeniably a more honest creation than the figures of Staircase, for example. His acerbic self-mockery is a truthful reflection of the way many gay men - particularly those with regal blood - send themselves up. His delight in shocking others with his outrageous behaviour, his cynicism about true love, his suspicion of lasting relationships and his wry acceptance of society's injustice all ring true. Terri at least comes across as a human being rather than a collection of clichés thrown together in the hope that a real person might emerge. There is pride and suffering beneath the queenly exterior and Nichols avoids the sickly pathos which marred homosexual drama throughout the 1960s.

Furthermore, he sometimes shows a genuine understanding of problems facing gay people which have rarely been considered elsewhere in drama. For instance, Terri relates what happened when his partner was killed in battle:

> The next-of-kin were informed, his wife and his mother, but I had to hear it a long time after from someone off the same ship in a gay bar.[6]

Bereavement is a painful experience made harsher for many gay people by the lack of any social recognition of private grief. Terri's war-time experience was repeated in both Vietnam and the Falklands and gays are still often excluded from the social rituals which mark the death of a loved one. Nichols deserves credit for touching on specific issues such as this, for by giving concrete examples of injustice he avoids a generalised pity.

Nor does he deny his gay characters dignity. Len and Charles have agreed to stay together once the tour of Malaya ends. When Len is killed late in the play, Charles kneels by the side of his dead lover and kisses him, displaying great nobility in his grief. This quality of personal dignity is one which has been missing from most homosexual characters in literature and drama up to the present day.

Yet, for all these positive qualities, Privates On Parade still seems to me to pamper its liberal audience, asking little more from them than easy sympathy. In spite of its deeper understanding, misery and homosexuality are linked together as inextricably as in works like Staircase and The Boys In The Band. Terri's sad tales of past lovers, his droll comments on the seamy underside of gay life, his caustic defensiveness, Charles' neurotic guilt, the tragic ending of the play's homosexual love affair, all combine to paint a gloomy picture of homosexuality. The audience is left in no doubt that this is unfair, but this pleasant sensation of being on the side of the angels is all they are encouraged to feel. The stale, camp jokes titillate a comfortable audience and Nichols' humour has none of the liberating earthiness of Joe Orton. Orton raises two fingers to a stuffy, self-righteous world, whilst Nichols pats his audience on the head and congratulates them for

being so tolerant. Privates On Parade avoids the worst excesses of the 1960s (as indeed it should, since it was written in 1977) and occasionally shows a real understanding of the problems gay people have to face, but it keeps them in their proper place. They are still good for a laugh or a few tears.

The treatment of homosexuality in Ronald Harwood's The Dresser (1980) is far more elliptical. The play is the story of a dresser's love for the famous actor he looks after. Indeed, it could be argued (and doubtless would have been in previous years) that Norman's love for Sir is not sexual. It is certainly never labelled as such and Norman's exact feelings are never known to the audience.

The only overt reference to homosexuality in the play comes with the news that one of the cast has been arrested for importuning and even this information is imparted through euphemism: 'the trouble with Mr. Davenport-Scott'.[7] The company hardly respond with unconditional support. Some of them, like Mr Oxenby, are not sorry to see Davenport-Scott punished for his misdemeanours. The star actor has more liberal leanings ('A fellow artist brought low and in the cells cannot be cause for rejoicing'[8]) but even he uses words like 'bugger' and 'nancy-boy'[9] to describe the unfortunate Mr Davenport-Scott.

The revelation of Norman's feelings marks the dramatic climax of Harwood's play. The Dresser builds up to the point in the final scene when Norman and Madge stand together on stage, having just witnessed the famous actor's death. Both of them have nursed a secret, hopeless passion for many years, their feelings un-noticed

by the egotistical star actor. Madge leaves, and Norman is unable to control his emotions any longer; he discloses his true feelings in the course of the soliloquy which concludes the play:

> Well, I have only one thing to say about him and I wouldn't say it in front of you - or Her Ladyship, or anyone. Lips tight shut. I wouldn't give you the pleasure. Or him. Specially not him. If I said what I have to say he'd find a way to take it out on me. No one will ever know. We all have our little sorrows, ducky, you're not the only one. The littler you are, the larger the sorrow. You think <u>you</u> loved him? What about me?[10]

There are problems here for the director and the actor playing Norman. If this final confirmation of Norman's feelings is not to lose all its power, some degree of surprise must be retained. Audiences should suspect Norman's true feelings, and want them to be made clear, but they must never be allowed to become certain. This means that Norman cannot be portrayed in a stereotyped fashion, yet Finney, in his award-winning performance, played Norman with a host of fussy, 'feminine' mannerisms which threatened to give the game away. The text almost demands such an interpretation, though, since Norman calls people 'ducky' and is quite clearly drawn as theatrical, if not necessarily effeminate. It is a dramatic tightrope between anticipation and surprise which, in my opinion, Harwood does not walk with complete success.

<u>The Dresser</u> depicts homosexuality in muted tones. Norman's love for the actor is no different in essence from Madge's, and it is neither sentimentalised into something tragic nor trivialised into a source of humour. His feelings range from the noble and caring to the jealous, petty and resentful, and are treated with the same gravity, sympathy and irony as those of Madge. The play never makes homosexuality into an issue and Norman never becomes

a symbol of the homosexual; its central theme is rather the selfishness of the great artist and the unsung heroism performed by the little people backstage. It shows the barren personal life which can result from single-minded dedication to a career and is in another sense a slice-of-life behind the theatre curtain forty years ago. Within this framework, homosexuality is treated as something unexceptional. Harwood's play could be called either subtle or evasive, depending on one's point of view.

It is vital that homosexuality is not portrayed in a stereotyped way in Ira Levin's Deathtrap (1979). The play is an ingenious thriller with a script within a script and a plot which twists and turns from start to finish. At first, the audience is led to believe that a successful dramatist and his wife are plotting to kill an aspiring young writer so that they can steal his play and claim it as their own. However, an unexpected twist reveals that the dramatist is in love with the young author and that it is they who have masterminded the murder of the wife.

Clearly, there must be nothing in performance to signal either male character's sexual attraction towards the other, since the plot depends entirely on springing a complete surprise. Therefore, stereotyping becomes impossible; the slightest wilt of the wrist might give the game away. Throughout the decades of this century, camp mannerisms have been used as a quick way of signalling 'homosexual' to an audience, so it marks a welcome change when the reverse happens in the first act of this thriller. Levin uses a different preconception - that people are assumed heterosexual until proven otherwise - to help him set his trap.

Homosexuality is never an issue in Deathtrap; it is an integral part of the mechanics of the plot and is treated as such in a matter-of-fact way. This is essential if the play is not to lose tension and develop into something completely different. A thriller must move quickly and cannot afford to ponder on weighty themes or it will lose the vital ingredient of pace.

However, the way the two men respond to their sexuality is used to broadly differentiate between their characters. The married man feels guilty and tries to hide the nature of their relationship from other people. The young man hails from a different generation, has no such worries, and finds the older partner's anxieties rather amusing.

The characters in Deathtrap cannot be called run-of-the-mill, since they plot and execute a murder together and then spend the rest of the play scheming to dispose of each other. It could be argued, therefore, that Levin depicts gay people as ruthless and amoral, but this seems a somewhat over-sensitive reaction. After all, characters in murder mysteries tend to be unsavoury or there would be no murder! In fact, Levin's treatment of homosexuality is utterly pragmatic and makes no moral stance; it is merely a useful device to conceal the mechanics of his plot.

Julian Mitchell's Another Country (1982) clearly demonstrates how popular concepts of homosexuality had matured over twenty years. Mainstream audiences, once satisfied by the one-dimensional stereotypes of Staircase, could now accept a play as thoughtful and as intelligent as this story of Cambridge in the 1930s.

Another Country is set in a top public school which has been

shaken to the roots by the suicide of a pupil who has been found having sex with another boy. Homosexual activity is very common at the school and most pupils seem to take part in it at some point:

> Everyone gives in in the end ... You just have to put the idea in their heads, and give it time to grow. People get bored with frigging. And lonely. They long for company."

However, as always in British society, the golden rule is not to get caught. Even though homosexual behaviour is so common in the school, everyone colludes in the pretence that it does not happen. A pupil named Delahay typifies the cynical attitude which the school inculcates. He does not condemn the boys morally for what they have done but blames them for being stupid enough to get found out.

Homosexual activity is commonplace, but for most of the pupils it is merely a mixture of rebellion and experimentation or a pleasant way to release sexual frustration. For a few, though, it carries more significance, as it does for the play's main character, Guy Bennett. Near the end of the play, he tells his best friend, Judd, that he has realised that he will be homosexual for the rest of his life. As the year is 1930, Bennett finds it difficult to express his feelings. All the words are negative and he is trying to describe something beautiful:

> I'm sick of pretending. I'm - (he can't find a suitable word) - I'm never going to love women.[12]

Bennett knows this because of the feelings he has held for a fellow pupil. These were of an intensity he has never known in his sexual experimentation and convince him that he is homosexual.

His reaction is a mixture of relief and despair. He is relieved to be certain at last and not to have to pretend to anyone, most of all himself. However, this is tempered by an awareness of the problems - emotional and social - which lie ahead of him.

Bennett's consciousness seems to belong to the 1970s more than the 1930s. Having realised that he is homosexual, he does not suffer a crisis of conscience or become consumed with guilt. With more than a hint of the confidence of a modern gay man, he immediately sees his future struggles as social and political. He accuses Judd:

> ... you really believe that some people are better than others because of the way they make love.[13]

He also understands that the people who will oppress him in the future will be exorcising their own homosexual feelings. British society is dominated by a small élite of men with public school backgrounds, many of them haunted by memories of their early homosexual experiences.

Another Country treats public school as a microcosm of British society. It is an environment where homosexuality is common - the opposite sex is excluded at precisely the age when puberty is hastening sexual development - and yet which is intensely homophobic, perhaps as a result of this homosexual undercurrent. The 'true' homosexual then becomes the sexual scapegoat of this bizarre system. British society, like the schools which supply many of its top people, pretends there is no homosexuality in its midst. Discretion guarantees safety, but little mercy is shown to the individual who is careless or unlucky enough to get caught.

Anyone unwilling to collude with the hypocrisy of this society

must needs rebel against its entire structure. Communist theory offered young intellectuals of the 1930s a critique of Western society; Judd, who has just discovered the ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin, sings the praises of communism throughout Another Country. It is easy to understand why revolutionary solutions attracted people who had been made into outsiders in their own land. The similarity between the name of the play's hero, Guy Bennett, and the spy who fled to Moscow in the famous homosexual scandal of 1951, Guy Burgess, is certainly not coincidental, especially as Burgess was educated at Cambridge in the 1930s. Mitchell is suggesting that sexual repression played a major part in the move towards communism during that decade. Judd argues that 'There's complete sexual freedom in Russia'[14] (although he was actually out of date here, since the post-Revolution liberties had been repealed by Stalin). The move towards communism in the 1930s was a reaction against the hypocrisies and inequities of the British system, including its sexual hypocrisy.

Another Country is a complex look at the British establishment and the way its standards are instilled into the people groomed to become its future leaders. It shows how this system creates outsiders, and examines the relationship between alienation and political radicalism. There is corruption and nepotism in British society, and traitors may not be motivated by disloyalty or greed, but by a frustrated idealism. The title of Mitchell's play carries a double meaning: the other country is both the USSR and the tiny clique who make up the British establishment. When people reject the latter, because they are excluded from it or because they cannot accept its hypocrisies, they may well move towards the former.

1983 saw the West End rediscovery of John Osborne's under-rated play, A Patriot For Me, which had fallen foul of the Lord Chamberlain when first written. The text has already been studied for its role in the battle against stage censorship, but an attempt must be made to explain why the play which caused such a furore when first written became a popular success less than twenty years later.

The style and tone of A Patriot For Me may be more robust than other plays of its time, but it is still essentially a liberal document. The plot is conventionally tragic: Redl's glittering career is left in ruins because of his homosexuality, his talent is wasted and he is eventually forced to shoot himself. Redl is never at ease with his sexual orientation and makes several attempts to 'cure' himself, both by establishing a settled heterosexual relationship and by sleeping with various women. The Baron sums up his efforts:

> Tried everything, apparently. Resolutions, vows, religion, medical advice, self-exhaustion.[15]

The play contains many scenes which stress the problems and unhappiness facing homosexual people. Redl is beaten up by a male prostitute and four of his soldier friends; a young man named Mischa has a nervous breakdown because of his homosexuality; the gay world is portrayed as a carousel of casual, meaningless sex. The content of A Patriot For Me is sufficiently depressing to fit other plays written at the same time.

The play also offers audiences the voyeuristic pleasure of the Drag Ball scene. There is plenty to titillate in this vision

of men dressed in women's clothes and male couples masquerading as man and woman. The gathering glitters with characters who fit the screaming queen stereotype - Albrecht, Marie Antoinette, Tsarina, Lady Godiva - and it seems to be implied that these 'bitch' homosexuals are attracted to 'butch' homosexuals like Redl. The days when a scene like this might have shocked a West End audience have long since gone; on the contrary, such a spectacle may even be reassuring. Audiences can enjoy the thrill of watching an exciting world from a distance, while feeling secure in their own 'normality'.

A Patriot For Me may have broken many rules but it still did not transcend the two inevitabilities of sixties gay drama: stereotyping and despair. Modern spectators are better informed than those of twenty years ago and will no longer accept these things at their crudest. Thus, they might reject the simplistic cartoons of Staircase or The Killing Of Sister George, whilst they will welcome a more intelligent play like A Patriot For Me with its share of contradictions.

For instance, Redl may be a victim of society's sexual hypocrisy, but he is no shrunken psychological misfit in the classic sixties mode. A cold, cruel streak in his nature comes out in his relations with other homosexuals, whom he abuses as a way of working off his own intense self-hatred. He strikes one of the Baron's effeminate guests during the Drag Ball and viciously torments his boyfriend, Viktor, in a bedroom scene near the end of the play. His career ends in ruins for unjust reasons, but it is rather difficult to feel overly sympathetic towards him. Having chosen to inhabit the sordid world of espionage, Redl must face the consequences when its rules turn against him. In short, Osborne's hero demands a

more complex response than mere pity.

Moreover, although A Patriot For Me has its share of screaming queens, it also contains characters (such as Redl himself) who are nothing like the classic gay stereotype. Redl is the strong, silent type, confident of his masculinity, and not in the slightest way camp. Nor do all Osborne's characters accept society's denigration of them and wilt under the social pressure. Some, like the Baron, feel completely at ease with their sexuality and have a positive image of themselves as homosexuals.

Two further aspects of the play help to explain both the resistance it met from the Lord Chamberlain and the popularity it found in 1983. First, A Patriot For Me refuses to tone down the sexual aspects of homosexuality. Osborne's characters are seen in bed together and chasing the pleasures of the flesh. Second, it is based on a real historical episode, which gives the play a larger, political dimension often lacking in other work of the period. Homosexuality is treated as a social rather than a psychological phenomenon. Osborne is too canny to be taken in by the psychological jargon of the times which he satirises in the form of a character called Dr. Schoepfer. This Freudian fount of wisdom, who advocates castration for all male homosexuals, believes that only a man and a woman can attain true love. As for homosexuality:

> these traits are caused by regression to the phallic stage of libido development, and can be traced to what is in fact a flight from incest.[16]

In many ways, A Patriot For Me was ahead of its time; therefore, it remains sufficiently intelligent in its treatment of homosexuality to satisfy a modern audience. On the other hand, it does not

demand the commitment to gay rights that political drama often requires, or the intimate knowledge of gay lifestyles which plays specifically for an all-gay audience tend to assume. The vagaries in fortune experienced by Osborne's text sum up the changes in attitudes to homosexuality over the last twenty-five years. A play which could not get a performing license when first written is now ideal material for the conventional West End theatregoer.

Harvey Fierstein's Torch Song Trilogy is a combination of three one-act plays originally performed separately on New York's off-off-Broadway. The plays are linked by the character of Arnold, a middle-aged, Jewish, gay man who rents an apartment in New York.

In the first play, Arnold is working as a drag queen in a seedy gay bar. The audience immediately recognises him as the outrageous queen; he enters wearing make-up, a wig and women's clothes and delivers a long, camp monologue in which he sends himself up and casts a cynical eye over the excesses and follies of metropolitan gay life.

Arnold has trouble establishing a permanent relationship on New York's frenetic gay scene. Impersonal sex is easier to find, as is shown by an episode where he goes into the 'backroom' of a gay bar and, in a scene of astonishing sexual frankness for mainstream theatre, mimes being fucked by an imaginary partner. As soon as they are finished, the stranger disappears, and Arnold has never even seen the face of the person with whom he has just had sex.

When Arnold does meet a man he likes, he turns out to be a

repressed, conventional man who is dating a woman at the same time. Ed does not find it easy to come to terms with his homosexual side and sports a stiff shell of masculinity to hide his insecurity. Naturally, this does not make for a settled relationship, and, after another long evening sitting at home waiting for the phone to ring, Arnold eventually calls up Ed and breaks off the affair. However, Ed turns up back-stage at one of Arnold's drag shows and the two part on friendly terms.

The second play takes place one year later. Arnold and his new boyfriend have been invited to the house in the country where Ed and his wife now live. The weekend proves traumatic for all four of them. Ed once again has to face up to his repressed homosexual feelings when he and Arnold's boyfriend find themselves alone in a hayloft together; Ed's resolve weakens and the pair have sex. Meanwhile, Arnold and Ed's wife are having a long heart-to-heart in the kitchen, sharing their previously unspoken fears. By the end of the weekend, both Arnold's relationship and Ed's marriage have been subjected to severe scrutiny.

The final play in the trilogy takes place five years later. Arnold's boyfriend has been murdered by a gang of thugs and Arnold has adopted a delinquent teenager through the city's social services. Arnold is on edge because his mother is due to arrive and she does not know about the adoption. Things are not helped when Ed also turns up on the doorstep with the news that his marriage has finally collapsed. This play examines Arnold's relationship with his mother and the distance which exists between them on account of Arnold's homosexuality. Little is resolved by the end; the gap between Arnold and his mother is too great, and she returns home

with them having agreed to differ. The final image of the play is one of Arnold sitting curled up alone in a chair, a rather sad and lonely figure.

Torch Song Trilogy seemed destined to flicker briefly off-off-Broadway, but finished up winning awards on both sides of the Atlantic. Like Bent, it was helped by a marvellous performance by a leading actor, Antony Sher. Its origins on the Fringe show through in scenes like the one featuring sex in a backroom and by its raising of topics such as casual sex and homosexual adoption of children. Its success on Broadway can perhaps be best explained by its use of quick-fire one-liners in the tradition of Neil Simon and its scenes of domestic upheaval which could easily come from a soap opera. These made the play conventional enough to appeal to a wide and varied audience.

Other West End successes have included La Cage Aux Folles, The Normal Heart and Breaking The Code. La Cage Aux Folles is a gay musical based on a French stage play of the same name. (The script was also made into a French-Italian movie which is vastly superior in quality to either the musical or stage play). Set in a French night club which specialises in drag acts, La Cage Aux Folles presents plenty of opportunities for extravagant song-and-dance numbers in glittering, outlandish costumes. As in most American musicals, the piece is joyful and optimistic in mood and endorses new-world individualism. It could therefore be argued to speak out for the rights of its two main characters to be gay (one of its songs, I Am What I Am, has come close to becoming an unofficial gay anthem). However, there is a sentimentality in the

musical which does not exist in either the stage play or the movie, and all the blue jokes and risqué moments are toned down or removed. La Cage Aux Folles is less a celebration of homosexuality or campness than a calculated portrait of it. I suspect that its producers deliberately set out to milk the huge gay market which now exists in major cities. This speaks volumes for just how deeply male gay themes have penetrated the theatre, but it does nothing to give bite or significance to the dramatic work produced.

The Normal Heart also has its share of sentimental moments, but it is inspired by a ferocious sincerity. This story of the New York gay scene's first contact with AIDS will be discussed in greater detail in a later chapter. Its success on Broadway and the West End can largely be explained by its topicality; the play struck a nerve.

Breaking The Code is an English play by Hugh Whitemore which travelled in the opposite direction. This tells the life-story of Alan Turing, a brilliant mathematician who broke the Enigma codes and thus played a major part in the Allied success against the Nazis. After the war, he was hounded by the authorities on account of his homosexuality and eventually committed suicide. Being a British play, Breaking The Code is rational, intelligent and under-stated, similar in tone to Another Country. It deals openly with Turing's homosexuality but makes it only one part of his complex personality; Whitemore refuses to sentimentalise the homosexual into the role of victim. Essentially a piece of gay naturalism, Breaking The Code has a mature and sophisticated

attitude towards homosexuality without demanding too committed a response from its audience. Once again, its success was greatly helped by a leading actor, Derek Jacobi, whose sheer talent smoothed over a few deficiencies in the text and some rather uninspired direction.

On first sight, the plays covered in this chapter have remarkably little in common. They range from a drag musical to a harrowing tale set in a concentration camp and their treatment of homosexuality varies from partisan and supportive in The Normal Heart to completely incidental in Deathtrap. Clearly, there are no automatic rules any longer with regard to gay drama and the plays of the 1980s have been eclectic in both style and content.

Yet certain common traits can be discerned in these plays. None of them condemns or blatantly ridicules homosexuals. The old-fashioned screaming queen is still popular, as in Torch Song Trilogy and La Cage Aux Folles, but characterisation has become far more varied in general. Even the screaming queen is no longer a cauldron of self-hatred. In all of these plays, the gay character is given the role as hero with whom the audience is encouraged to sympathise; only Deathtrap breaks the rule by creating villainous homosexuals.

These mainstream works bear the effects of the politicisation of the early 1970s and yet none of them is committed to a single political vision. Audiences are not asked to agree with a certain political philosophy or to belong to a particular sexual class. However, they are assumed to disagree with prejudice and to broadly sympathise with the struggles of the gay individual in a prejudiced society.

The phenomenon of mainstream success for shows featuring gay men has occurred on both Broadway and the West End, and new works have travelled either way across the Atlantic. However, as so often in gay drama, America can probably claim to have taken the lead in this area. As long ago as 1971, a nonchalant treatment of homosexuality characterises The Gingerbread Lady, written by that doyen of middle-of-the-road taste, Neil Simon. The stage directions of The Gingerbread Lady may be somewhat coy in their description of James Perry as 'probably homosexual'[17], but there seems little doubt about Jimmy's sexuality within the body of the play:

> EVY: Why don't you marry me?
>
> JIMMY: Because you're a drunken nymphomaniac and I'm a homosexual.[18]

Jimmy's homosexuality provides the material for a few light-hearted jokes, but it is incidental to the plot. Clearly, homosexuality has become a very ordinary thing in this particular theatre.

Jimmy displays a typically self-deprecating wit:

> I'll take a walk in Central Park. If I'm not back in an hour, I found true happiness.[19]

This humour, though, is not aimed at the character. The gag succeeds by giving a knowing wink to an audience who are invited to join in a shared joke. Since Neil Simon was an extremely popular playwright with his finger on the pulse of Broadway theatre, this shows that, even in 1971, he could assume an audience who would appreciate the joke. The West End has taken longer to reach this position (if, indeed, it has). Glancing through the plays covered

in this chapter, it is noticeable that the most unequivocal and daring work has reached the West End via Broadway. Left to their own devices, the British still prefer to contain challenging gay work by keeping it within the confines of the Fringe.

Theatre audiences, of course, cannot be called typical of society in general, for theatregoers represent a small minority of the population. Genuine mass entertainment happens through the media of TV and radio and writers using them can expect to speak to millions of people. In consequence, though, they have to be even more careful about what they say and how they say it. In these fields, a writer can assume very little about his or her audience.

12. THE BOX IN THE CORNER

Television and radio lie at the end of the dramatic chain which begins with fringe theatre; stylistic innovations and controversial issues generally reach there last of all. Even during the halcyon days of The Wednesday Play, when television enjoyed a reputation for gritty, realistic drama, homosexuality was a strictly taboo subject on the small screen.

Yet no institution, even the most conservative, can resist social change forever. Standards relaxed, and over the last ten years homosexuality has been portrayed in television drama. The gradual developments which took place in the theatre were accelerated in television, squeezing a century of change into one small decade.

David Mercer's A Superstition was broadcast in 1977, but the play seems to exist in a time bubble. It portrays a world of delicate gentility reminiscent of The Green Bay Tree. Mercer's central relationship, like Shairp's, is between two men of widely different ages: 'Oliver in his early sixties, and Harry, in his late twenties.'. Like Dulcimer, Oliver surrounds himself with the trappings of culture and refinement and endeavours to lead a life of studied ease. The ambience of the play, if not exactly camp, is languid and decadent as Oliver and Harry luxuriate in their life of endless leisure.

Forty years on, we are back in Shairp's familiar world of wealth, privilege and culture. Although Oliver is not to the

manner born (the character speaks of his 'vulgar upbringing'[2]) he relishes a lifestyle of which Dulcimer could scarcely have disapproved. The setting is a villa in the South of France, the two men are waited on by a Yugoslav houseboy, the strains of classical music swell in the background and each meal is a gourmet's delight, accompanied by the formalities of napkins and aperitifs. Oliver and Harry begin to tire of the South of France and casually discuss moving on, clearly unfettered by responsibilities or financial considerations. The viewer learns that Harry was a film editor before being blinded in a car crash, but this is the only time that the subject of work ever raises its ugly head and disturbs the precious gentility of this sybaritic world.

For wealth provides the characters with a deeper gift: the culture and refinement which form the foundation of this highly civilized lifestyle. The very first words spoken in the play, a rather pretentious exchange about music and art, demonstrate the importance of aesthetic values for the two main characters:

> OLIVER: Which do you prefer, Harry? The Schnabel recording or the Kempff?
>
> Pause.
>
> HARRY: I was trying to remember that small Cranach nude. Where was it? The Louvre? The National Gallery?[3]

This is a hackneyed, stereotyped view of male homosexuality which can be traced back to Victorian attitudes. There is no suggestion that navvies, lorry drivers, policemen, or even solid, middle-class citizens like doctors and solicitors might be gay; male homosexuals are invariably artistic, refined and extremely wealthy.

If this ambience of leisured elegance is reminiscent of The Green Bay Tree, the content and tone of A Superstition come closer to the plays of Tennessee Williams. A torrid, melodramatic story-line acts as a vehicle for a symbolic work about the polarity between religion and sexuality, and an attempt is made to plumb beneath the facades of polite, social existence into the unconscious depths of human personality.

Oliver and Harry are lovers of two years duration. Harry lost his sight in a road accident which happened while Oliver was driving and the two men are trying to cope with the anger, resentment and guilt resulting from this. Things get worse when Curtis appears, an ex-priest who is pathologically obsessed with Oliver and follows him around the world. Whenever Oliver believes he has found a love which will last, Curtis emerges from the shadows and shatters the illusion. Oliver is terrified of Curtis, but cannot control the sexual desire which the ex-priest awakens in him. The two men are perfect sexual partners, for Curtis delights in taking the masochistic role in brutal sex and Oliver's true pleasure lies in inflicting pain. After each sado-masochistic session, Oliver is always racked with unbearable guilt: this time his guilt is so intense that he murders Curtis and follows this by hacking off Harry's head with a machete.

These lurid, bloodthirsty events are presumably intended to demonstrate some sort of psychoanalytical truth. Oliver certainly has an extremely neurotic attitude towards sex. In the past, he has had dozens of short-lived affairs, all doomed to failure because he uses relationships as a way of fleeing from his sexual needs rather than as a means of gratifying them. He finds true

sexual pleasure only from taking the sadistic role in a sado-masochistic relationship (punishing himself by proxy) but cannot come to terms with this. He is essentially a puritan, an aesthete who would be happier if he could skate on life's beautiful surface and not be troubled by its messy sexual urges. His puritanism demands that sex be linked with cruelty and suffering. An abhorrence of his own homosexuality intensifies this process until he is driven to satisfy both his sexuality and his self-hatred by means of inflicting sexual pain on someone else.

Oliver is incapable of establishing a permanent relationship with anyone. For most of the play, he is tense and snappy, as if goading Harry into a position where he will break off their affair. Oliver realises that his guilt about the car crash binds him to Harry and cannot cope with this kind of restriction. He is filled with horror, both by the complete sexual abandon he finds with Curtis and by the steady companionship of a long-term relationship. Trapped between these extremes, he destroys them both in a frantic attempt to relieve himself of his unbearable self-loathing.

The symbolic significance which Mercer intended his play to demonstrate seems obscure to the point of indecipherable. The text mentions a tribe in Borneo who believe that the blind are holy and that the head of a blind man acts as a talisman against evil. The final camera shot as the credits roll on to the screen is a photograph of a native holding up a severed head. One presumes that Oliver looks on Harry as a talisman to protect himself from his own homosexual urges. In this case, Curtis must be a symbol of Oliver's 'darker' side, the primitive, blood-red sexuality which he tries to repress in himself. If so, this

tooth-and-claw view of human sexuality seems somewhat lurid, belonging to the Desmond Morris school of human behaviour.

Mercer's play weaves several symbolic threads which twist and turn and finish up in an untidy knot. Is the introduction of the natives from Borneo meant to show that the fear of sexuality is universal? Or that the 'savage' and the 'civilised' person are sexually identical beneath a surface veneer? Why has the play been placed in a homosexual context? Is it because homophobia is the most virulent form of sexual repression in our society? Or is homosexuality assumed to be linked in some way with the violent sexuality that the play uncovers? Of course, symbolism should not attempt to supply exact answers - its unique strength is that it can feel out connections not amenable to logical analysis - but it must at least strike a chord. The symbols of A Superstition fail to resonate and the result is a muddy piece of writing which does nothing to enlighten.

A Superstition is a bizarre play marred by excess. It is revealing that in 1977, when the stage was just starting to approach homosexuality in a less sensationalised way, television chose to transmit a play which placed it in stereotypical surroundings and linked it with murder, misery and madness. Mercer's play is not without its merits. It tries to deal candidly with human sexuality and to delve beneath superficial assumptions about sexual desire. It touches on an area of sexual behaviour - sado-masochism - which plays an important role in male gay culture and yet has hardly been dealt with seriously by any gay playwright. Finally, A Superstition has undeniable power for all its excesses. However, it is difficult not to conclude that television producers chose

the play because it turns homosexuality into a freak show. It also finishes on a traditionally moralistic note, all of its homosexual characters 'punished' in some way for their homosexuality, two of them paying the ultimate price of their lives.

John Peacock's More Lives Than One, broadcast in 1984, underlines how much had changed in a few years. It abandons stereotypes for everyday characters drawn with the close attention to detail at which television excels. It tells the story of David, married with two sons, and his struggle to come to terms with the homosexual side of his nature. His only homosexual contacts are breif sexual encounters in a toilet in the local park. David keeps this part of his life secret, but one of his wife's friends sees David in the park and his secret slips out. At the same time, one of David's casual contacts becomes more serious and he is tempted to leave his wife and move in with his new lover.

The vision of homosexuality put forward in Peacock's play is a sophisticated one. The central character is depicted as the most ordinary of men and the play has none of the rarefied hysteria of A Superstition. On the contrary, More Lives Than One denies rigid sexual compartments; David's behaviour is too contradictory to be contained within one sexual label. He cannot simply be categorised as a gay man who has suppressed all his homosexual feelings in an attempt to live a straight life, for he loves his wife deeply and has fathered two children. However, neither is he a heterosexual man who happens to have occasional gay feelings. For, if so, why is his sexual desire for men so insistent and why

has he lost all sexual feelings for his wife? The easiest solution is to call him bisexual, but this is little more than a verbal compromise which says nothing specific about his emotions or desires.

I have argued elsewhere that these difficulties of definition, although they may seem rather arcane, must form the starting-point of any study of homosexuality. However, most drama has avoided this area, presumably because most people (including authors) assume that everyone can be placed in a fixed sexual compartment. This has been true on both sides of the fence. Society has begun to integrate homosexuality by creating a minority of individuals (homosexuals) who are different from everyone else. Gay activists have built on this idea of a fixed sexual identity, investing it with pride, so that to be a lesbian or a gay man becomes a positive form of self-definition. Most drama has consequently assumed that such a thing as a homosexual person exists and that preferences in sexual behaviour create a sexual identity. This was blatantly true of the stereotyping of the 1960s, where sleeping with one's own sex led to those elaborate edifices of dramatic characterisation, the butch dyke and the screaming queen. But it was equally true of the political writers who followed, whose characters thought of themselves as 'gay' and saw their gayness as an essential part of their own self-identity. Drama has concentrated on the far ends of the spectrum and very little has been said on the subject of bisexuality.

One of the primary aims of gay drama in the 1970s was to give a dramatic voice to a group of people who had never existed on

stage before: the generation of young, politicised lesbians and gay men who grew up with GLF. This did little, however, to remove the shroud of silence from other homosexuals. More Lives Than One is one of the first plays to attempt to speak for the thousands of married men who live double lives, finding casual sexual relief in public toilets. For all its advances, gay drama has said amazingly little about these double agents.

In concentrating on the gay activist and the self-defined gay person, staged gay drama simply responded to its audience. The kind of spectator willing to go to a theatre to see an acknowledged 'gay play' was more likely to come from the gay scene than from a family relationship. Television seems the natural medium for plays about the married gay woman or man; its intimacy makes it an excellent producer of domestic drama. It is now also the medium of mass entertainment, the only dramatic outlet to which many people enjoy regular access.

More Lives Than One disrupts conventional assumptions about gay and straight, and should also be commended for dealing frankly with male gay sexuality, especially the activity of having sex in public toilets (cottaging). This practice has generally been cloaked in embarrassed silence, coming to light only when local newspapers print the names of people found guilty of 'importuning' or 'gross indecency'. However, Peacock, unlike Mercer, does not allow his frankness to deteriorate into sensationalism. He makes the reasons for cottaging very clear: a lack of convenient meeting places; the invisibility of other gay people; the desperate need to keep one's homosexuality a secret.

Nor does Peacock pull his punches in his criticism of the

police. He shows them drilling holes in the ceiling of a public toilet so that they can hide in the loft and peep through at what is happening below. When two men are having sex, the spy in the loft whispers on his radio to two colleagues waiting in a nearby car. The police often display an unhealthy fervour in their efforts to catch offenders, as when the officer in charge snarls 'Let's go screw the bastards.'.[4] David and Steven are lucky and escape, but one poor, old man, entrapped by an officer acting as an agent provocateur, is carried off in the car. Having witnessed this, David asks, 'What have we done? What have those men done?'.[5] Peacock's play shows that cottaging is a crime without a victim and that the police are not always too fussy about how they get their arrests.

It seems inevitable that television will deal with homosexuality in a desexualised manner. The ubiquity of television, its ability to reach into the living room and speak to millions, makes it a particular target for moral watchdogs and would-be censors. Consequently, plays about gay characters have rarely shown them in bed together, even though the intimate bedroom chat is a cliché of domestic TV drama. Given this situation, Peacock should be commended for tackling one of the most controversial aspects of male gay sexuality. He tries to explain behaviour which most people dismiss as sordid, and unequivocally condemns the police for their zealous pursuit of cottaging offenders.

However, as a piece written for television, More Lives Than One needs to be more careful and conciliatory than a fringe play which can assume a supportive audience. In order to prevent his viewers from switching off after the first ten minutes, Peacock

has to offer them some anchors for security. Therefore, his opening scene is a stereotyped family get-together which could come from an advertisement: mom, dad, kids and dog play football in the park. The setting is solid and suburban, and Sarah and David would be most people's idea of a nice couple. The play also treads familiar artistic grcund, never straying from the well-worn paths of domestic naturalism, functioning as a variation on that most popular of television themes: the marital crisis. Peacock makes every attempt to render his play accessible to a wide and varied audience.

The characters of More Lives Than One are ignorant and frightened of homosexuality and stumble through the play like sleepwalkers who hope to wake from their nightmare. Many viewers would be able to identify with these characters who share their confused, fearful attitude to the subject. Like them, they are probably made uncomfortable simply when the topic is raised.

David can only cope with events by ignoring them. For the first half of the play, he evades Sarah's efforts to pin down what has gone wrong with their marriage. When Sarah's persistence finally squeezes the truth out of him, he tries to face up to his problems. However, they eventually get the better of him and he can only run away once more, proclaiming that all his homosexual feelings have vanished. Sarah makes an attempt to face the situation rationally but it seems beyond her comprehension. She could have understood if David were having an affair with another woman, but homosexuality is something completely out of her experience. David's business partner and best friend, Colin, is utterly un-nerved by events and wants everything to go back to normal.

He tries to persuade David that he is not gay and to go back to his wife. When David argues that 'you have to be honest',[6] Colin's reply is simple: 'No, you don't.'.[7] The only character who does not share this fear and ignorance of homosexuality is David's boyfriend, Steven, who has come into contact with the ideas of gay politics.

The attitude people take towards homosexuality within the play, then, is not the relaxed tolerance of the liberal middle-classes but a traditional mixture of fear, evasion, hostility and prurient curiosity. This forges a link with those viewers who share this outlook and enables Peacock to put political arguments to people who are unlikely ever to have encountered the ideas of gay activism. More even than the gay naturalism of the stage, television gay drama needs to handle politics in a subliminal way.

Hence, the ending of More Lives Than One, with the husband returning to the wife, could be seen as a tame retreat to the heterosexual status quo. As usual, the homosexual relationship is portrayed as ephemeral and the heterosexual one as permanent. Peacock's play is descriptive rather than prescriptive, portraying the lies and evasions which many homosexual people feel compelled to live without explaining in wider social terms why this happens. It does not ask for any commitment to social change on the part of the viewer.

But this analysis is extremely harsh and ignores the demands of the genre in which the play is written. Naturalism tends to be descriptive rather than overtly ideological and characters with too much political awareness would strain the framework of Peacock's play. As it stands, the weakest scenes are those in which its politics are most directly stated. The play is at its strongest

when reflecting reality as accurately as possible, even if the verities it shows are disagreeable ones. There is the ring of truth about the play's ending and the way everything gets swept back under the carpet; the many thousands of married men who continue to live this sort of double life bear witness to the ubiquity of this compromise.

Nor should this ending be taken at face value. It does not represent a happy-ever-after return to heterosexual bliss but a regression to the lies and evasions of the beginning. More Lives Than One is shot through with irony. In the reconciliation scene at the end of the play, Sarah asks David, 'Did you ever use our marriage as a cover?',[8] to which he replies, 'No. And I never will. You must believe that.'.[9] Both characters know that this is untrue, as does the viewer. In the scene immediately before this, when David tries to confide in his best friend and tell him that he is gay, it becomes clear that Colin has no desire to hear the truth. All three have a vested interest in sweeping the subject under the carpet and pretending that the whole thing never happened.

At the very end of the play, as the credits roll, the camera shows David driving his car through country lanes, following a young man on a bicycle. It is obvious that David's desire for other men is as strong as ever and he will go on leading a double life, irrespective of what he has told Sarah. This final piece of irony, which undercuts the reconciliation scene which precedes it, indicates what the future has in store. It has been easier for everyone concerned to collude in falsehood rather than to face up to the truth.

A similar sophistication of outlook, in terms of both characterisation and political awareness, marks a recent radio play, The Other Other Woman by Aileen La Tourette (Radio 4, 1985). Harriet, an American woman teaching in England, faces a personal crisis in her life precipitated by the break-up of her lesbian relationship and a growing disenchantment with her teaching job.

The Other Other Woman depends as a piece of writing on the characterisation of its central character. The text is an exploration of Harriet's complicated personality, not so much a story with a beginning, a middle and an end as a journey through the twists and turns of her labyrinthine soul. In consequence, the other characters are rather one-dimensional. The most important of these is Harriet's best friend in England, a gay man named Richard, who acts as the play's raisonneur, the sensible friend who offers her sound and sympathetic advice.

Harriet's characterisation is subtle and complex and is not determined solely by her sexuality; other factors, like her career, her left-wing political beliefs and her American background are just as important in forming her personality. She is an idealist who takes herself a little too seriously at times, but she displays a dignity and integrity unusual in lesbian dramatic characters.

The Other Other Woman touches on many political issues, particularly those which have concerned the feminist movement over the last ten years. Harriet is strongly opposed to sexism, racism and heterosexism, although her daily experiences make her doubt whether these things will ever be eliminated. The unthinking prejudices of her pupils, the endless stream of racist and sexist

jokes which punctuate her lessons, depress her and make her wonder whether she achieves anything worthwhile as a teacher. She seems powerless to change the bigotry that her pupils learn from society (they describe women as 'fish' and argue that all 'Pakis' smell).

The play also raises the spectre of nuclear weapons. Harriet asks her class to draw pictures of themselves as they were in the past and as they see themselves in ten years time; without exception, they draw a mushroom cloud for their future. When Harriet questions her pupils about this, they are resigned to the inevitability of nuclear holocaust and convinced that they can do nothing to avert it.

A feminist awareness informs the entire play. In one scene, Harriet and a straight friend discuss the differences in society's attitude towards male and female contraception. They debate why condoms are widely advertised, sold in a multitude of colours and given sexy names, while the humble diaphragm never merits this exciting treatment. Harriet has no doubts why: it is yet another attempt to curtail female sexual autonomy, the action of a society which still 'wants nice girls rewarded and bad girls punished'.[10] (The play was written and broadcast before the AIDS epidemic significantly altered the image and purpose of condoms.)

So La Tourette raises many political issues in the course of her play through the simple device of making Harriet a politicised figure. She suggests that there are links between sexism, racism, heterosexism and the nuclear shadow which looms over the entire human race. Even on the BBC, it seems, homosexuality is no longer contentious enough to provide enough material for a whole play on its own. Homosexuality is not the central theme of <u>The Other</u>

Other Woman; other issues, such as nuclear disarmament and sexist oppression are given far more weight.

However, Harriet is not a symbol of the radical lesbian-feminist in the Gay Sweatshop mould. She has come to reject the purist lesbian-feminism of the 1970s and has left her lesbian group because she felt it expected her to trade in one set of dogma for another. Her new independence, though, leaves her rather isolated. Harriet will not accept a stereotyped female role in a nuclear family (even allowing for the modifications feminism has created in that role) but neither can she accept all the alternative orthodoxies of the lesbian-feminist movement. Whether her views represent a watering down of feminist principles or an example of the increasing sophistication of feminist thinking is a matter of opinion. That these arguments take place in drama aimed at a mass market, though, proves how deeply sexual politics has permeated mainstream thinking.

But for all its political concerns, the real heart of La Tourette's drama is Harriet's relationship with Stella. This tender love affair, described through flashback and monologue, had always been marred by the need to keep it secret on account of Stella's marriage. As the play progresses, Harriet gradually realises that she had been filling the traditional role of 'the other woman' in this relationship, being the lesbian lover of the wife instead of the mistress of the husband.

This simple truth finally hits Harriet as she listens to a phone-in programme in which a feminist answers questions from the general public. The feminist has written a book about the other woman which argues that this hidden figure performs a vital function in society, plugging the gaps in traditional monogamous

marriage and saving the nuclear family from collapse. Harriet is horrified to realise that this is exactly the role she has filled in Stella's marriage. In most extra-marital affairs, the feminist states, the married partner eventually forsakes the lover in order to return to the spouse; this is precisely what has happened with Stella. Harriet had believed that Stella was defecting to her camp, but she was the one who was actually compromising her principles by taking part in the kind of furtive relationship of which she disapproved.

Harriet recalls the dream which marked the turning-point in her relationship with Stella. One night, she dreamt that she stood on a tightrope while two groups of people gathered underneath. A group of men stood on one side, a group of women on the other; both called out to her and urged her to jump. On waking, she had described the dream to Stella, who laughed and called her 'complicated'." Harriet now understands that she had been asking Stella to jump over to her side at this point and join her as a lesbian. Stella had avoided the question and refused to choose between Harriet and her husband. From this moment on, their relationship had been doomed to gradually drift apart until the day when they agreed to stop seeing each other.

Since then, Harriet has been suppressing a cauldron of negative feelings: hatred for Stella, jealousy of Mark, resentment, bitterness, self-pity. Her feminist ideals have led her to brand these feelings as wrong, especially jealousy. Consequently, she has repressed them all. One evening, her defences finally crack and she bursts into uncontrollable sobbing. Richard, the perfect friend, ensures that he is around when this happens, reassuring

her that her feelings are healthy and normal and telling her that she has 'joined the human race'.[12]

The Other Other Woman links the personal and the political by suggesting a mixture of reasons for Harriet's crisis. La Tourette does not deny psychological factors but places these in a wider context. The relationship between Harriet and Stella does not fail because of personality defects in one or both of the women, but because society is organised in a way which dooms such a relationship to failure. Women are taught to structure their self-identity in relation to a man, so Stella has always seen herself as Mark's wife rather than as an individual in her own right. Personal relationships are founded on the model of the monogamous couple, making it very difficult to have more than one intimate relationship at the same time without resorting to deceit. Lesbianism is a secret form of behaviour given no official social recognition. With all this against them, Harriet and Stella had little chance of keeping a successful lasting relationship.

This blending of the personal and the political reflects a central principle of modern feminism which refuses to categorise issues into those that are public and important (economics, party politics) and those that are private and marginal (relationships, sexuality). Modern feminist theory has tended to be holistic, treating society as a complex whole in which each factor influences all the others. The nuclear threat affects the way people relate to each other and society's economic structure influences even 'private' behaviour such as the way people make love.

Blending psychological, sociological and political factors,

and covering a wide range of issues, The Other Other Woman cannot be called a lesbian play in the narrow sense. The problems which spark off a crisis in Harriet's life are essentially everyday ones: an unfulfilling relationship, career dissatisfaction, fear of middle-age, disappointment with unrealised ideals. The play treats lesbianism openly and sympathetically, assumes that the listener will do the same, and then moves on to explore other, more interesting areas.

More Lives Than One and The Other Other Woman have many parallels. They both take on board the ideas of gay activism, but work these ideas into a broadly naturalistic framework. They reject the 'hard' politics of Gay Sweatshop for a more subtle portrait of reality; not all gay men are happy radicals forging new types of relationships and not all lesbians have overcome society's legacy of sexist oppression. Both plays are about ordinary people, even if their characters come from widely contrasting backgrounds. David belongs to the upwardly-mobile working-class: he runs his own business and owns a detached house in suburbia, but still holds to the traditional social values of his working-class upbringing. Harriet takes a far more critical and analytical view of the world; she belongs to the new breed of radical, middle-class professional who votes Labour and yet lives in relative prosperity in Islington or Camden Town. This classification is to some extent a diminution of dramatic characters who are built in the round, but the essential point is valid: both characters have many more facets to their personality than their sexuality.

It is within the genre of naturalism that television and radio can make their best contribution to gay drama. For a start, radio is one medium where lesbian plays are as likely to get a production as plays about gay men, since figures suggest that the majority of people who listen to Radio 4 drama are female. Also, radio drama is one of the few fields in which women are employed in large numbers as writers and directors and enjoy some degree of power.

It seems doubtful - at least until the days of cable and community television stations - if 'alternative' gay drama will ever find a home on TV and radio. Plays which need to assume a gay audience may simply be considered too specialist for media which have to calculate success in terms of mass appeal. Censorship, too, is likely to restrict the advance of plays that succeed on the fringe. The guardians of public morality may baulk at attacking these when they take place in a pub theatre but will not be so restrained when millions can see them at a flick of a switch.

Television and radio can play a vital role in gay drama. In general, the smash hits of the West End and the offerings of the Fringe have ignored a huge group of gay people: the women and men tucked away in suburbia, often married, with no access to drama about homosexuality. Only the mass media can reach these isolated individuals and couples. Yet they, too, must have their representatives in a body of drama which purports to truly reflect all varieties of gay life.

The changes of a century have been compressed into a decade in TV and radio gay drama. In 1977, A Superstition created a picture of homosexuality not far removed from the Wilde Trials and

The Green Bay Tree. Both The Other Other Woman and More Lives Than One, less than ten years later, could be representatives of stage gay naturalism, treating their subject matter without the slightest sensationalism, as if homosexuality were the most everyday thing in the world. Between these two extremes, a handful of plays trace a history in miniature of 20th century gay drama: Coming Out (1979), a rather depressing piece by James Andrew Hall, had much in common with the defeatist, stereotyped plays of the 1960s; Only Connect, by Noel Greig and Drew Griffiths, brought gay politics on to the small screen in a piece of work about the life of E.M. Forster; The Groundling and the Kite (1984) portrayed two gay men in such a cosy and sanitised way that it is hard to imagine even Mary Whitehouse finding objection with them.

Recent gay plays for TV and radio show signs of being influenced more by their medium than by their subject-matter. The Other Other Woman is an archetypal radio play with its evocation of personal feelings and subtle emotions, subjects at which the intimate medium of radio excels. The play uses internal monologue, its language often lifts into the lyrical and even its naturalistic dialogue is characterised by colourful imagery and a strong sense of rhythm. Equally, More Lives Than One is a typical television drama, with domestic sets, prosaic dialogue and close-up realism. Both plays are rendered more accessible by their use of a standardised dramatic form.

In certain circumstances, then, homosexuality can be slotted into the standard forms of the mass media. This has led to the introduction of gay people (usually gay men) into the most

popular of all TV genres: soap opera, sitcom, TV movie, adventure series. In these genuinely mass-market forms of entertainment, though, even more caution gets taken to make the homosexuality palatable to all.

Stereotypes have become commonplace in comedy shows, figures of fun like Mr Humphries in Are You Being Served? and the more challenging black gay, Marigold, in In Sickness And In Health. The breakthrough in soap opera came in the spoof series, Soap; its gay character, Jody, was portrayed sympathetically, but it is interesting that the first example came in a pastiche of the form rather than the form itself. Dynasty broke the mould with the character of Steven, but here again the commitment was less than total. Steven's sexuality seemed to change as often as Joan Collins' outfits and a game of 'is-he-isn't-he?' both teased the viewers and safeguarded them from anything too challenging. In Britain, both East-Enders and Brookside, two soaps which pride themselves on being topical and realistic, have featured gay couples. To their credit, both have avoided stereotyping and made every effort to integrate their gay characters into the mainstream of the programme.

One of the most sympathetic treatments came in the English series, Agony, a situation comedy about an agony aunt, which was even daring enough to show a gay couple in bed together. American TV movies, which are currently earning a reputation for dealing with 'difficult' issues, have also offered some supportive images of gay people, including a play on AIDS called An Early Frost. However, gays on American TV are invariably white, middle-class professionals; Americans, it seems, can tolerate anything except poverty.

In a thesis about theatre plays, radio and television drama gets dealt with on a somewhat superficial level. The role of gay men and women in film is another area which could be profitably analysed in more depth. Most of the successful plays of the last twenty years have made it into celluloid and the process continues: Deathtrap, Another Country and A Patriot For Me[3] have all recently moved from stage to cinema. Challenging original work has also started to emerge in the medium, films like My Beautiful Launderette and its story of a love affair between an Indian boy and a London skinhead. As with stage drama, some of this work has been crowned with critical success: the film version of La Cage Aux Folles won an Oscar for best foreign film; William Hurt won the Best Actor award for his role in Kiss Of The Spider-Woman.

Gay men have now emerged from the darkness to become the subject for successful plays, films and TV shows. Yesterday's fringe is today's mainstream and what was daringly original in 1975 had become mass entertainment by 1985. This seemed at first to create a problem for the fringe. In the early days, it had a clear, sharply-defined purpose - to depict gay people on the stage in a sympathetic fashion. Once this was possible on the West End, on television, on radio and on film, the gay fringe seemed to have lost its special function. And yet, over the last few years, the gay Fringe has become even more active than before. Far from fading into insignificance, it has blossomed alongside mainstream gay drama. It is now time to leave the masses for the minority once more, and to examine why the need for alternative venues for gay theatre still exists.

13. ALIVE AND KICKING: GAY FRINGE THEATRE IN THE EIGHTIES

The origins of gay drama in Britain lie in GLF street theatre and the lunch-time season at the Almost Free. Gay theatre (as opposed to theatre about homosexuals) owes its very existence to the Fringe, which, in its many guises, has acted as a sort of demon in British drama in recent years, relentlessly discovering subjects and striking attitudes which were too controversial for the mainstream stage. Now that the West End is full of plays not far removed in tone from the pioneer works of gay drama, the Fringe has been forced to reassess its role.

Gay drama on London's fringe now tends to assume a set of attitudes from its audience, an outlook which might be labelled 'gay consciousness'. Plays often raise issues of interest to gay people which may be of little concern to heterosexuals. As the gay characters in mainstream drama tend to be white, middle-class men, the Fringe has begun to concentrate on people from other groups, particularly ethnic minorities. Lesbianism has been virtually ignored by mainstream drama, so lesbian theatre has been able to continue to evolve only on the Fringe. When the AIDS crisis began to make itself felt, the Fringe was first to grab hold of the nettle. Finally, stylistic innovation - any kind of radical deviation from the naturalistic norm - only seems possible away from the established venues.

Gay theatre on the London fringe hit a slump in the early 1980s. Gay Sweatshop stopped producing plays, although most of its members continued to work in fresh fields - either in groups

like New Heart or in solo pieces like Phil Osment's Telling Tales (Soho Poly, January 1983). Groups like Siren and Consenting Adults in Public struggled against the odds to keep alive community theatre for lesbians and gay men. It seemed as if the Fringe had been driven into hibernation by its own success, as the West End flirted with gay rights and smaller venues hosted gay naturalism. Around the middle of the decade, though, the pendulum turned and new work, brimming with energy and freshness, began to spring up around the capital.

One of the successes of the London fringe in 1984 was a show called Go-Go Boys, which filled both the Gate Theatre and the Half Moon for several weeks and received excellent reviews from City Limits and Time Out:('they are sensational',[1] 'My only complaint is that it finished.'[2]). The performance, later toured around England and taken to Canada, was a two-hander devised, scripted and acted by Andrew Alty and Howard Lester. In many ways a typical piece of Fringe theatre, Go-Go Boys took place on a bare stage, used short scenes interspersed with music and song and involved its actors in numerous changes of character. Like most 'alternative' theatre, it needed to be portable and cheap.

Go-Go Boys follows the developing relationship between a butch, beer-drinking heterosexual and a young gay man who meet when the straight rescues the gay from a gang of skinheads. Both are rather lonely: the gay man has plenty of sexual contacts but no real friends, and the straight man mixes with his 'mates' without ever really getting close to them. An unlikely friendship flourishes between the two men which is cut short when they are knifed by a

gang of skinheads.

This story-line is broken up by a series of sketches developing the issues touched on by the narrative. One scene in a police station shows a homophobic police officer cross-examining a gay man who is held under suspicion of a paedophile offence for no reason other than his homosexuality. Another is a parody of a TV quiz-show called So You Think You're Normal in which (male) contestants have to prove their normality in order to win prizes. Proof of normality consists of making sexist remarks, laughing at anti-gay jokes and failing to answer questions such as 'What is a clitoris?'.[3]

The straight man has the usual misconceptions about gay people and becomes the butt of some gentle humour. For instance, he says he could tell that the gay man was homosexual because of the kind of shirt he wears, the joke being that both performers are wearing identical shirts. Throughout the performance, Alty and Lester use humour to send up prejudice, supporting gay rights without ever seeming to be heavily propagandist in tone.

Of course, mockery of heterosexual ignorance is nothing new in alternative gay theatre. On the contrary, it has become something of a cliché to contrast a gentle gay man with a repressed, aggressive straight one. Even in mainstream drama, homosexual softness is commonly championed as a contrast to heterosexual machismo. Where Alty and Lester mark a new departure, then, is in their readiness to go beyond truisms to explore more complex areas.

For, in the second half of Go-Go Boys, we witness a much less likeable side to the gay man's character. When the two men meet

in a gay bar - a meeting which clearly required an act of courage on the straight man's part, to step into an unknown environment - the gay man ignores his friend, even asking him not to stand too close in case he ruins his chance of picking someone up for the night. Far from being gentle and open, the gay man is dressed from head to foot in leather, grimaces at the men he does not find attractive and calls them 'creeps'.[4] As for those he does fancy, they are treated as nothing more than sex objects. 'Now that's nice',[5] he says, pointing to an imaginary body.

In the following scene, the gay man visits his straight friend's house to find him alone with a blow-up rubber doll. The two forms of objectification are juxtaposed to underline that they are essentially the same; the bodies at the leather bar are also blow-up sex toys. Despite a superficial softness, the gay man is as desperate to prove his masculinity as the straight. In the bar, he dresses 'like a Hell's Angel'[6] in a living pool of leather and denim, sartorial symbols of the mystique of manhood. Other men are sex objects, fantasy figures with no inner reality, chosen or rejected on as little as whether they sport a moustache.

Homosexuality is not an issue in Go-Go Boys; the real subject of the play is the cult of masculinity and its warping effect on every man in our society. Sketch after sketch mocks the myth of machismo; as when two men grunt and groan while squaring up to each other at judo, or two straight men boast about their (imaginary?) sexual conquests. The gang of skinheads, the men in the judo club, the straights chatting up a couple of 'birds'[7] and the clones in the leather bar are all manifestations of the same process: men bonding together in an attempt to prove their masculinity to each

other. Frightened of tender emotions and ignorant of women, these men swagger with aggression to hide their unspoken fears. They cut themselves off in the process, both from each other and from the female sex.

Homo-erotic feelings are an integral part of this male bonding, but these are never acknowledged and physical contact can occur only under the disguise of sporty camaraderie. Alty and Lester again use humour to demonstrate this. The straight man is giving the gay man a judo lesson; as they lie on the floor, intimately clinched in a judo lock, the former explains how he finds the thought of two men close to each other quite repugnant. In another scene, the actors play a pair of flash characters showing off to each other about the 'bird' they 'pulled' [8] the night before. They paint the story in loving detail, boasting about the ride down the Hendon by-pass in the woman's Porsche and the decadent luxury of her bedroom: 'mirrors on the ceiling - bamboo bed'. [9] The tale ends with a hilariously revealing punch-line: 'And I thought to myself, if only my mates could see me now.'. [10] Even in bed, most men are showing off their masculinity, giving a performance for the benefit of other men and scarcely responding to the needs of the woman.

However, Go-Go Boys does more than send up the icons of masculinity. It is also a positive piece of work in that it shows glimpses of a different type of male bonding in the relationship which gradually builds up between the two men. This genuine closeness, perhaps a male equivalent to sisterhood, is rare and elusive; most men are too frightened of gentle contact to achieve it and hide this fear behind aggression. Even sexual contact need

not shatter this wall of masculinity; Go-Go Boys points out that gay men also have their rituals to prevent emotional intimacy. At heart, though, the show is as much a celebration of this rare intimacy as it is a denouncing of machismo.

Go-Go Boys marked a new departure in gay theatre in several ways. First, it was the product of a 'mixed' couple (Alty is gay, Lester is straight). This sort of collaboration had been abandoned in the early days of gay drama because gay people were determined to find their own distinctive voice. Clearly, a time has been reached when they feel confident that this voice has been found and artistic separatism need no longer be automatic. Many subjects may well be tackled best by a mixed group.

Go-Go Boys is aimed at a new kind of mixed audience, too. When gay drama first emerged, the only truly 'sympathetic' audience was likely to be a predominantly gay one. When thousands of ordinary gay people came out in the 1970s, though, they dispelled a great deal of ignorance and created a new audience. The people in this audience might not be homosexual, but they strongly support gay rights and have second-hand knowledge of London's gay subculture. This transcends the traditional liberal concern for a minority group and develops into a genuine understanding of that group's particular lifestyle.

For example, Alty and Lester assume that their audience will find the straight man's prejudices a source of amusement. When the Quizmaster of So You Think You're Normal sucks in his cheeks and dangles his wrist to make fun of gay men, the audience are laughing at his stupidity, not at the stereotype he portrays. An old cliché so often used to mock homosexual men is turned on its head, so that

the person who believes in this sort of nonsense is ridiculous and not his victims.

But the most important new development in Go-Go Boys is its readiness to criticise aspects of gay life. In general, gay groups had been extremely wary of taking a critical attitude towards a gay character. Equally, they had tended to ignore the unpleasant or unsavoury elements in gay life, fearing that their own criticisms would simply add weight to general disapproval. Unfortunately, this often led to a tame theatre which avoided contentious issues and lacked a critical dimension.

The greater self-confidence gay people now feel in the 1980s is being transformed into a more pungent, self-examining art; it is no longer essential to stress the optimistic and positive in order to support gay rights. Go-Go Boys clearly condemns many aspects of the male gay scene: the sexual objectification of the 'backroom'; the herd uniformity of the modern gay clone; the sexual solipsism of the cruising bar. It also refuses to romanticise the figure of the gay man into either hero or martyr.

This spirit of scepticism was even more pronounced in a show entitled Pornography, directed by Neil Bartlett in 1984, and devised from improvisation by three amateur performers. Billed as a 'spectacle' and staged at the ICA Theatre, Pornography was a patchwork of monologues and visual images rather than a narrative play. The work was produced by the 1982 Theatre Company, who had earlier created a show called Dressing Up for the 1983 September In The Pink Festival, a theatrical triptych depicting gay life in three historical periods: the Molly Houses during the 18th century,

Victorian London and the modern urban gay scene.

Pornography was completely contemporary. On entering the auditorium, audiences were transported into a seedy gay bar or night club. The stage was surrounded by shiny silver paper depicting naked male bodies in sexual embrace, loud disco music thumped, coloured lights flashed. The gay bar and the drag show supplied the imagery of Pornography. In one scene, the actors cavorted in exaggerated fashion to the music of Donna Summer; in another, they read passages straight out of gay sex magazines; the final scene was a 'walk-down' in the drag-show tradition, each actor donning his most glittering costume for the grand finale.

Sex forms the central thread of Pornography, linking what one reviewer summed up as 'an improvised and amusing string of 'let's talk dirty' sketches'.[11] In total contrast with a great deal of homosexual drama, which has studiously avoided any contact more sexual than a peck on the cheek, Pornography deals blatantly with the physical realities of gay sex. This explicit sexuality, coupled with its gay scene imagery, steers Pornography towards a rather select audience: gay men familiar with metropolitan gay life. It confronts this audience with the material of their daily lives, forcing them to examine their attitude towards it. Bartlett explained in an interview with me that he sought to challenge gay men with the simple question, 'What do you want?'.

One of the dialectics fuelling Pornography is the polarity between romantic love and casual sex. The sex stories which are read verbatim from pornographic magazines mingle eroticism with sadism and trade in the clinical language of 'tools', 'shafts' and 'erections'.[12] An effeminate gay man lists the derogatory words which

people have used about him and his body: 'bitch', 'hole', 'receptacle', 'bit of arse'.[13] The words used are nearly identical; in both cases, sexuality is reduced to nothing more than a mechanical function.

The apotheosis of this sexual objectification occurs in a monologue about a sexual encounter between a gay man and a skinhead. Blending the erotic, the horrific and the tongue-in-cheek, an actor recounts his fantasy of following a skinhead home, being on the receiving end of some brutal sex, and then leaving, without either of them having spoken a word. He goes on to recall a time when this is supposed to have happened. The rough trade proved to be a little rougher than expected and kicked him in the face until blood spurted from his nose and mouth.

This anonymous, brutal sexuality is contrasted with sentimentalised images of romantic love, as when a young man clutches a bunch of flowers and talks of his dreams of marrying Mr Right. The two sets of images meet when an actor unwraps a box of chocolates shaped like a red heart. As a violin plays romantically in the background, he removes each layer of wrapping paper to discover yet another layer in what seems a futile, endless search. When he finally reaches the centre, he finds not a box of chocolates but a pornographic magazine.

In general, Pornography presents its dialectic of romantic love and impersonal sex through visual imagery, avoiding direct statement. However, there are moments when the piece becomes more discursive and broaches its subject-matter bluntly, without recourse to symbolism. For instance, at one point an actor walks among the audience and fires questions at them. 'Is that your lover', he asks, 'Your partner, your affair, your fuck for the night?'.[14]

This abrasive act in an abrasive show underlines some of the inconsistencies of modern gay life. Many gay men seem trapped between two worlds, dissatisfied with both. The first is the quasi-heterosexual world of Mr Right, lasting relationships, monogamy and married bliss; the second is the nighthawk life of cruising, anonymous sex, sexual objectification and heavy sado-masochism. Many gay men profess that they want a lasting relationship while, in reality, they function on the cruising circuit. They bemoan the coldness of the commercial gay scene but are deeply attracted by its hard, leather-clad mythology and its sexual license.

'What do you want?', to repeat Bartlett's question. One scene from Pornography nicely brings out the difference between what some gay men claim they want and how they behave. Centre-stage, in full spotlight, a naked actor points to parts of his body and names them in a flat, matter-of-fact voice. At the same time, a young, handsome actor strips off before a mirror at the back of the stage, half-shrouded in darkness. The attention of the gay men in the audience rested on the boy in the shadows; the role of voyeur was more pleasurable than that of open spectator. As well as voyeur, the viewer also became a sexual predator devouring the handsome young actor. The pictures on stage made the audience reveal their true priorities and standards simply from where their eyes lingered.

The phrase 'I want' runs through Pornography like a verbal motif. At several points, the actors scamper to the front of the stage and shout out the things they desire, ranging from 'I want one of these angels to come to life and fuck the arse off me'[15] to

'I want to win a million pounds'.[16] This leaves an impression of a gargantuan hunger seeking constant gratification, forever disappointed with the finite pleasures of reality.

However, Bartlett explains that he did not intend this hunger to be seen as a purely negative force. He sees this dissatisfaction as the driving motor which led homosexual people to reject the legacy of the past and demand a new life for themselves. Pornography is less a moral comment on current gay mores than a succession of variations on a theme, the same landscape glimpsed through different filters. Bartlett's intention in devising Pornography was to stir gay people into taking a critical view of the new reality they have created for themselves.

A show like Pornography would not have been possible ten, or even five, years earlier. It relied on an urban gay audience who took their homosexuality for granted and were familiar with the commercial gay scene. This generation has a degree of freedom unknown to those of the past; they can branch out in several directions and choose the kind of life they want to lead. Having struggled during the 1970s to create a bubble of freedom, gay men now have to face the responsibilities that come with increased choice. They have to decide exactly what they want.

In the recent past, writers and performers have tended to avoid the issues that concern Pornography: casual sex, drag, effeminacy, sado-masochism. These things have been associated with male homosexuality to the detriment of gay men, so the first gay theatre groups were highly sensitive about raising them. It could be argued, for instance, that the blatant sexuality of Pornography reduces gay men to nothing more than their sexual

behaviour. In the early days of gay drama, this might have been enough to make a group abandon the theme; the option of raising contentious issues and leaving them unresolved is a recent luxury, only possible because of the greater self-confidence which gay people in general feel.

Pornography was an interesting show, but I have to admit to some serious reservations. The first is essentially formal. Non-narrative, imagist theatre, lacking the traditional anchors of plot, character and linear development, remains an elitist genre which alienates many people. Certainly, I spoke after the show to members of the audience who felt irritated by its experimental form. There may be commendable reasons for the use of amateur performers, but there were times during the longer verbal monologues when the actors were simply not capable of holding the stage. Nevertheless, the creators of Pornography used the form with intelligence and skill, generally avoiding the pretentious mystification of much Performance Art. And, in the final analysis, if nobody tries to exceed current boundaries, gay theatre will never go beyond its current obsession with fly-on-the-wall naturalism.

A second, more important reservation pertains to a negativity in Pornography, a lack of idealism which contrasts poorly with Sweatshop's optimism or Sherman's warmth. Charles Spencer, the reviewer from The Stage, shared these doubts, stating that he had found the show 'profoundly depressing'.[17] Pornography had lots of wit but no joy; it reduced gay men to fucking machines. Spencer summed it up well in his review:

> During the show's course, the audience is required to inhabit a world in which the vast range of human possibilities has shrunk to include nothing more than hard cocks and tight bums.[18]

This is not to say that gay drama must always be up-beat - the abrasive edge of the show marked a welcome change from the political clichés of some Fringe gay theatre - but Pornography seemed cynical about every option open to gay men. Traditional romance and monogamy were portrayed as false and foolish, and yet the alternatives were hardly better; sex was no longer a source of joy, but a mechanical function repeated ad nauseam; love was essentially a form of self-delusion, a romantic fantasy. There seemed no chance of a reasonably happy compromise between facing the truth of an insatiable, consuming hunger and living the traditional lies of heterosexual society. Ultimately, Pornography was depressing because it limited gay men, trapping them in chains of their own making from which they can never be free. The show was constructed with lots of imagination but very little vision.

One thing of which Gay Sweatshop could never be accused is negativity. In the autumn of 1983, after a break of approximately three years, the group re-emerged with a new Noel Greig play, Poppies. This was originally produced at a Gay CND conference and owed much of its inspiration to the peace movement. Set on Hampstead Heath, the action is split between two periods: the start of the Second World War in 1939, and the (then) future Britain of 1986. In this imaginary future, Britain is under martial law during an international crisis which is about to escalate into nuclear conflict.

Sam/Sammy is the character linking the two periods. In 1986, he and his lover are having a picnic on Parliament Hill, looking down over a silent London spread out before them. There are flashbacks to 1939 showing the time Sam met another young man there, a soldier nicknamed Flag who went to fight in the war and was killed in battle. An expressionistic element is added by two mouldy heads which intermittently pop up above the soil, praising the joys of being alive and stating how awful it is to be under the ground, unable to taste, touch, eat or drink.

The characters of Poppies are depicted as ordinary people trapped in an oppressive system they did not create, with which they do not agree and which threatens to annihilate everything. This system will collapse only when ordinary people take control of their own lives and leave the warmongers to rot in their bunkers underground.

The obvious objection to this argument is that it is too simplistic. Martin Hoyle, of The Financial Times, stated that 'the play seems to oversimplify the problems of militarism and masculinity, pacifism and polemics. Its heart is firmly in the right place; its intellect diffused and unfocused.'[19] Gay Sweatshop have often been criticised for a politics which is too simple; Greig, however, anticipates this criticism by suggesting that the complexities of the issue are deliberately created in order to cloud the natural simplicity of the arguments.

Poppies is essentially an exploration of masculinity and its role in the creation of militarism. The play gives many examples of men's inability to express emotional intimacy: Snow refuses to kiss Sam in public; Sammy has to sneak past Flag's landlord when

they go to his room; Hippo (Snow's skinhead son) will not admit that he loves his brother in case this is interpreted as a sign of homosexuality. But if men could show tender feelings for each other and express their fears and loneliness, Poppies suggests, there would be no need for these emotions to become twisted into dangerous aggression.

Yet, in spite of its sombre imagery of nuclear weapons, military curfews and rotting corpses, Poppies is a celebration of life and of the natural human love of life. The representatives of Death are society's leaders, the government which broadcasts its message over the radio that people should 'disperse and go home'.[20] Its ministers cower in their shelters below ground, buried in earth like the two mouldy heads. They might as well be dead, too, for they cannot enjoy the simple pleasures of life and are driven by their puritanism to wanton destructiveness. Poppies is an optimistic play, though, in that it assumes that people are essentially good and can still resist the mad, mass death-wish of nuclear war so long as they retain this basic goodness:

> Shall I tell you when the bomb drops? Not when the cities explode. When we stop our lives, that's when. It's dropping every day, all around us. Pick up a paper, and the dust comes off in your hands, open a letter and it chokes you. They've got us cringeing in corners already, cringeing on hillsides.[21]

At the end of the play, Hippo, Snow and Sam walk down the hill, ignoring the voice on the radio. They will no longer cringe in corners or on hillsides, but are determined to seize power while the government is underground. People can still assume control of their own lives if they have the courage to take responsibility

for the events happening in the world.

In many ways, Poppies is a typical Gay Sweatshop play, entirely consistent with the work the group performed from 1975 to 1980. It is socialist, pacifist, optimistic, radical. At its root lies the GLF belief that the gay movement is not just a pressure group proselytising for the rights of homosexuals, but a new departure which aims to transform the roles of men and women in society. Poppies assumes a direct link between sexual and political repression and argues that the roots of militarism lie in the inability of men to touch each other, physically and emotionally.

In a formal sense, too, Poppies bears the hallmarks of Gay Sweatshop. The intertwining of several strands of plot is typical of Noel Greig's work, creating a thematic complexity instead of the psychological depth of naturalism. The setting of the action in two time periods - 1939 and 1986 - is another device common in political gay theatre. This ensures that the focus of the play remains on social and historical realities - in this case, the changing expressions of homophobic militarism - and does not stray into the personal concerns of specific individuals.

However, Poppies also marks a progression from Gay Sweatshop's earlier work. Homosexuality is much less central to the play. It remains relevant in that Poppies explores the relationship between homophobia and institutionalised aggression, but there is certainly a change of emphasis away from the direct issues of gay rights towards the larger concerns of the peace movement.

This is a result of the new artistic and political freedoms available to the group in the mid-eighties. The expansion of gay drama which Gay Sweatshop themselves pioneered has released them

from the arduous task of trying to represent the entire gay movement. They are no longer the one voice of sanity in a chorus of ignorance and can leave many struggles and issues to other groups and playwrights. Nor are they obligated to try to create representative characters, a Gay Everyman and Everywoman. With so many other theatre-workers creating a rich and varied gay drama, they are free to explore their socialist ideals in greater depth.

I also seem to detect in Poppies a subtle change of mood, the depressing realism of the 1980s tinting the old Gay Sweatshop idealism. The characters have lost the confidence of the earlier Sweatshop heroes; the optimistic ending lacks the old conviction. The script has the elegiac quality of a movement that is being forced on to the defensive and looks back to a golden age of progress. It expresses hope for a happy outcome which gay people once saw as an inevitability.

Consenting Adults in Public performed work throughout the 1980s, almost the only British group to provide a continuous body of gay drama over that period. For their annual Midsummer Matinee on Hampstead Heath in 1985, they produced Eric Presland's Campfire, a farce set in the open air. Two groups of campers pitch their tents in adjacent fields: a troop of boy scouts, and a gay outdoor club for leather and S/M enthusiasts. This situation offers many opportunities for disastrous encounters and hilarious misunderstandings, especially as two of the characters are identical twins who have not seen each other for twenty-five years.

The text is well suited to a rough performance in the open air, even if the plot is rather complex for a situation in which

individual lines can get lost and the audience might wander in and out. Any potential confusion is compensated for by moments of big, uncomplicated humour: two scouts shove lumpy blancmange through a sweaty sock in order to get the lumps out before serving it up; a play within a play goes disastrously wrong when one of the actors mixes up all his lines; in the darkness, the puritanical leader of the scout troop uses what he thinks is toothpaste and ends up with a mouthful of KY lubricating jelly. The audience gets incorporated into the show when the scouts sit around the campfire and lead them in a medley of well-known tunes.

Campfire is fringe theatre as celebration, as fun. The gay audience enjoys laughing at the ridiculous puritanism of the straight characters, particularly a female inspector, Deirdre, who turns up unexpectedly to inspect the scout troop. First, she mistakes the gay leather group for the scout troop. When she does track down the scouts, she is horrified to find them all dressed in drag and scurries off before she can realise that they are rehearsing a show. She hurriedly enlists the help of a policeman to put an end to this rampant perversion but events conspire to make her look hysterical. Puritanism and paranoia are sent up and a good time is had by all. 1985 was a depressing year for the gay movement: the AIDS virus first became big news in Britain; H.M. Customs and Excise raided Gays The Word bookshop and confiscated scores of titles; Rugby council threatened to dismiss employees who were known to be homosexual; there were several police raids on gay clubs and establishments. Given this situation, an opportunity for a belly-laugh was to be welcomed. Joe Orton and street theatre met on Hampstead Heath and provided a welcome change

from the depressing fare of so much gay drama.

Siren are another group who produced a substantial body of work through the early 1980s. An all-woman collective based in London and Brighton, they produced Pulp in 1985, a show devised from improvisation and written into shape by one of their members, Tasha Fairbanks. Billed as a 'lesbian thriller', Pulp has a rather complex plot which interweaves narratives from two different periods. The first takes place in New York in 1955, and is a lurid tale of murder and betrayal set against a background of seedy nightclubs and internecine Mafia warfare. The second is the modern story of two lesbian members of a government intelligence agency and the problems they experience from keeping their relationship secret.

Pulp uses three distinct dramatic styles. The 1955 scenes are presented as a parody of Hollywood gangster movies and feature the stereotyped characters of pulpy detective novels. The modern action is staged naturalistically. A third variation is provided by the songs and music, played, written and sung by the cast, which interrupt the narrative.

Pulp's roots clearly lie in the early days of political gay drama. The show contains the sincerity and conviction of the first gay groups and uses devices which can be directly traced back to the political theatre of the 1970s. The inclusion of songs to break up the action, the cartoon-style characterisation of the scenes from the 1950s, the portable set where scenery was pared down to the basics of chairs and table, had all been trademarks of the touring theatre groups of the previous decade.

However, Siren displayed a talent and professionalism which outstripped most early gay groups. Feminist and lesbian art has often had to suffer criticism for failing to achieve high standards but this is one criticism which could certainly not be levelled at Siren. The members were all accomplished actors, sliding smoothly from parody to naturalism, and were adept at playing multiple parts, announcing a change of role by nothing more than a new accent and a quick change of clothes. Furthermore, each actor showed herself capable of playing at least two musical instruments.

The text also represents an advance on the rather humourless, simplistic writing which often marked the first attempts at gay drama. The exaggeratedly stereotyped characters, who would not have been out of place in a film noir, gave the show pace and wit. These women from the 1950s are also depicted as worldly-wise, confident and tough; in spite of feminism and Gay Liberation, the modern characters are certainly no more assured. Thus, Pulp avoids the patronising assumption that homosexual liberation began in the 1970s. The problems facing the modern characters are all the better understood for being seen against a caricature of life in the 1950s.

The writing avoids any ideological knee-jerks. Unlike at least one of the plays in the 1985 Gay Sweatshop Times Ten Festival, it does not assume that the mere mention of CND will send its audience into raptures of applause. Despite an external simplicity which shades into caricature, Pulp contains a political subtlety far advanced from the agit-prop theatre which served as its model.

This is exemplified by the character of Monika, the German

neighbour of the lesbians who work for British intelligence. At first, she seems a rather clichéd figure: the woman who has spent years in a concentration camp and whom suffering has turned into a fount of wisdom. But the final scene reveals a fact which turns previous assumptions on their head: Monika had not been an inmate, but the camp commandant. Everything takes on a fresh significance with this knowledge and a political cliché gives way to the tangle of circumstances which motivate decisions taken in the real world. Humanity is not divided into saints and sinners and political choices do not exist in a vacuum; people are frequently placed in situations where they feel compelled to collude with a corrupt system.

On a less extreme level, the modern-day lesbians are making similar compromises to Monika. In order to keep their jobs, they hide their lesbianism and live in fear of its being exposed. This means they can never totally trust each other, for there is always the possibility that one of them is on surveillance work and will report what they find back to headquarters. This combination of espionage and homosexuality has great dramatic resonance in Pulp. The play makes a wry comment on the role of Intelligence and its tortuous absurdities, all supposedly done for our benefit. More centrally, the secrecy and suspicion of espionage is a good metaphor for the dual lives which most homosexuals live. On a wider level still, the play reflects the compromises everyone makes, gay or straight, with a social system which stifles their personal development. One of the modern lesbians, Ella, eventually decides she can no longer compromise herself in this way and resigns from her post. However, she is under no illusion that her decision

will change the world. She also realises that the hardest part may just be beginning - finding the courage to truly be herself.

Ultimately, though, the characters from the 1950s are the ones who earn more respect and affection: Magda, the self-centred actress, who has the strength to be a career-woman in an age when women were presumed to belong in the home; Heddy, the cynical reporter, who falls in love with Magda and struggles with these unknown feelings of tenderness; Dolores, the girl from the sticks in Hicksville, who lives in a fantasy world based on the movies and who turns out to be on the run from her husband; Kay, the gauche, drink-sodden private detective with a heart of gold. These figures who begin as caricatures slowly fill out until they are somehow deeper and truer than the naturalistic characters.

It is in the scenes from the 1950s that Pulp is at its most effective: sharp, fast, slick and entertaining. The naturalistic scenes feel slow and thin in comparison, but they are necessary if the play is to become more than a charming pastiche. At its best, Pulp had the thrust and clarity of Any Woman Can, but with considerably more skill. It made clear political statements but also left behind some thought-provoking questions.

In October 1985, Gay Sweatshop organised a Festival at the Drill Hall to commemorate their tenth anniversary. A three-week event of plays, poetry, music, cabaret and dramatic workshops, the Gay Sweatshop Times Ten Festival aimed to be both a celebration of the achievements of gay theatre and a launching pad for new gay drama in the future. The group produced an all-woman production especially for the Festival, Raising The Wreck, a play about

female pirates which likened these historical figures to contemporary rebels such as the Greenham Common women. Experienced members of the group also helped to guide and direct a series of rehearsed readings.

The main thrust of the Festival was to give new writers a chance to see their work performed. Gay Sweatshop produced seventeen rehearsed readings in all of 'plays in progress' out of over ninety scripts offered them. By concentrating on rehearsed readings rather than polished finished performances, the group were able to give many more authors an airing for their work.

A further important element of the Festival was the importing of work from abroad, such as The Performance Company from New York and Terry Baum's one-woman show. There were poetry readings by groups of gay men, black lesbians and a mixed group of Northern gay writers, and drama workshops for disabled gay women and men. The Festival finished with a grand cabaret and even included a session by a gay ceilidh band, Pinque Rince.

Clearly, the aim of the Festival was not to create a few flawless works of art. Artistic perfection was less important than giving gay writers and performers the chance to put forward their ideas and gain theatrical experience. Gay Sweatshop had begun as a community theatre, and this varied showcase of literary, dramatic and musical work was a celebration of ten years of the gay community, a birthday party for all those who had struggled to create gay culture.

Certain groups of people were actively encouraged to produce work for the Festival on the principle that they had been ignored by gay theatre in the past. A deliberate policy was made to feature

roughly the same amount of work by women and men, a rare parity, even on the Fringe. Lesbians and gay men from ethnic minorities were invited to come forward with scripts and two plays dealing with colour and sexuality were read: Chiaroscuro: Light and Dark by Jackie Kay, and Education: Part One by Ibo. Disabled gays took part in two separate workshops to explore the feelings of being gay and disabled with the intention of turning this into a piece of dramatic writing. Disability and sexuality is a topic which has hardly been raised by the theatre, even within a heterosexual context.

This marked a new direction for Gay Sweatshop, which had tended to be a white, able-bodied group. The encouragement of drama by black and disabled gays was a logical and laudable extension of policy for a company which had always existed to stage plays which were unlikely to get produced elsewhere. At the same time, the company reverted to a policy of corroboration in joint male/female productions after a long period of single-gender concentration on specific issues.

The problem lies in achieving a successful blend of art and politics; work which is politically laudable can be artistically lamentable. The issue of artistic quality, however, does have to be raised. Disadvantaged groups can rarely develop their theatrical skills because prejudice keeps them out of mainstream theatre. The Festival format of workshops and rehearsed readings neatly circumvented this problem by creating a situation where experiment and discovery were more important than finished product and where new writers and performers could test their powers in a supportive atmosphere. But this is a temporary solution, and

artists eventually have to survive in the critical jungle where works of art are judged by their aesthetic quality and not by the goodness of their intentions.

The argument might be advanced that Gay Sweatshop is painting itself into a corner. Black and disabled gays are minorities within a minority and a larger audience may feel disinclined to turn up to see theatre about them. The counter-argument runs that this is all the more reason to stage their work and that plays written in this field can be just as 'universal' as any other. There was certainly no sign of dwindling audiences at the Festival, which was generally well-attended, even if it seemed to attract few people from outside its own circle of supporters.

It is also worth pointing out that, in many ways, Gay Sweatshop have now widened their base. Homosexuality is no longer the single central issue of their work while other concerns remain peripheral. As Jim Hiley of City Limits said of Poppies, Gay Sweatshop's latest work is 'very much the product of a gay consciousness, but contradicts a common criticism of gay theatre by looking out from the ghetto.'.[22]

We are back to the familiar arguments about ghettoisation and community theatre: are black lesbians performing to black lesbians producing work in a ghetto, or are they creating the sort of community theatre of which most political artists can only dream? What seems certain is that theatre which only recently got branded as 'ghetto gay theatre' has now spread out to radio, TV, the West End and the 'established' Fringe. With a plethora of plays about young, white gay men appearing in these media, there seems every reason why the gay fringe of the future should speak for the multitude of gay people who do not fit this description.

As mainstream theatre has moved into territory which the Fringe once claimed as its own, the work produced in halls and public houses has changed in its turn. The Fringe has begun to depict sections of the gay population - lesbian, black, disabled, working-class - who are under-represented elsewhere. It remains stylistically experimental and innovative. It still tends to overt political radicalism, unlike TV, radio and the West End, which disguises its politics beneath a naturalistic surface. Finally, fringe gay drama often springs from and serves the gay community, unlike mainstream drama which is generally produced by professionals who are distanced from their audience.

Just as different theatres are creating various forms of gay drama, different types of audience attend them. The lesbians and gay men whose social (and sometimes professional) lives revolve around the big-city gay scene make up the mainstay of community gay theatre. These people also form a sizeable proportion of the audience at venues which are not thought of as exclusively gay - the studio spaces where gay plays form part of a broader 'alternative' repertoire. West End audiences are more varied, although they tend to be predominantly middle-class and liberal. The only true mass audience belongs to television, where every shade of opinion from gay activist to raving homophobe might see a play on a gay theme. (Of course, this categorisation is overly schematic in that the groups overlap and individuals can belong to all four.)

Fringe gay theatre sprang up to serve a specific audience and still relies on the patronage of a relatively small group of people. In Britain, therefore, it tends to be concentrated in

London. (The same process has happened in the States, where groups have emerged in the larger cities, particularly New York and San Francisco.) Fringe groups may tour and take their work to the regions, but the heart of the gay Fringe is firmly lodged in the metropolis.

A change of outlook has been reflected in the tone of the latest Fringe work. Gay people are no longer desperate to see anything that contains gay characters who do not scream and slash their wrists, nor do they need their courage bolstered by the events on stage. Audiences are far more critical; there is more gay theatre available and they can shop around. Gay people's experience of oppression is more subtle than that of twenty years ago and spectators expect the stage world to mirror their new reality.

Therefore, the latest Fringe work displays greater artistic and political sophistication. A few groups, like Consenting Adults, continue to make a virtue of their amateur approach, but most strive to achieve a polished professionalism. Issues other than homosexuality are often more central to the work, although some groups are narrowing their sights still further so that they focus tightly on a specific issue (for example, the experience of being black and gay). There is no longer any assumption that a generalised progression can be captured on stage which represents the majority of gay people. Gay experience in all its vast variety is now acknowledged.

This has resulted in a new willingness to tackle contentious issues, to criticise aspects of gay culture and to make judgements about gay characters. The concerns of Pornography, for instance -

drag, sado-masochism, effeminacy, promiscuity - have rarely been raised in gay drama for fear of fuelling prejudice. The political heroes who earned our respect simply for coming out of the closet have disappeared now that so many ordinary individuals have taken that step. The latest gay characters may well have acute problems, suffer from anxiety and lead unhappy lives; it is no longer regarded as treachery to show the unpleasant aspects of gay life. Ironically, the Fringe is now the place where one is most likely to encounter a critical view of gay characters. In comparison, mainstream theatre tends to play safe and present a more sanitised vision of homosexual experience.

However, self-criticism has become possible only because of the positive self-esteem which now exists in the gay community. A sense of pride and worth underpins the dazzling diversity of the new Fringe, from the prickly Performance Art of Pornography to the elegiac pacifism of Poppies. Fringe theatre spent several years putting forward the simple message that 'Gay is Good'; in their early days, Gay Sweatshop built entire plays to demonstrate this fact. For many gay people, this is now a belief they carry around with them in their daily lives and which need not be stated any longer. From such a confident foundation, it is possible to explore negative emotions without abandoning a basic position of pride in being gay.

After a few fallow years, during which a lot of theatrical energy went into mainstream drama, the gay Fringe has experienced something of a boom over the last few years, both in variety of content and sheer volume of output. It seems inevitable that recent trends on the Fringe will be picked up by mainstream theatre

in the future. This has been the historical precedent: Gay Sweatshop paved the way for Wilcox and Sherman, and GLF street theatre can be dimly detected in the transvestism of Torch Song Trilogy. The Fringe will retain its function as a harbinger of the future, a breeding ground for new talent and a place where barriers can be broken.

Marginalisation remains a constant danger. The gay Fringe can easily become perceived as an island adrift from the theatre mainland, an exotic country peopled by a tribe with its own strange customs. Just as female playwrights have suffered from their work being dismissed as 'women's theatre', gay writers can also be shunted into a critical cul-de-sac. It is vital that theatre critics are forced into taking gay theatre seriously and that prejudice does not affect available subsidy.

The best Fringe theatre is generally undervalued and never reaches the audience it deserves. Audiences are often also sectarian: only four men sat in the audience on the occasion when I saw Pulp. Yet the show was entertaining and intelligent theatre, deserving better than to be confined in a slot labelled 'For lesbian-feminists only'. In terms of artistic quality, I found both Pulp and Go-Go Boys at least the equals of the acclaimed successes, Rents and Coming Clean. However, their audience was almost certainly limited by their Fringe origins and their critical reputation diminished through not using the naturalistic form.

The existence of a Fringe can also create a split within gay theatre, a divide which sets a variety of small groups on one side (lesbians, blacks, 'politicos') and 'ordinary' gays (i.e. young, white, middle-class men) on the other. The latter are

legitimised and become regular figures on the West End and television, while the remaining groups get relegated to the Fringe. This is not only absurd, but patently unfair; there is no reason why the experience of a black lesbian, for instance, should have less universal significance than that of any other human being.

The gay Fringe has been in a state of rude health during recent years, but warning signals are sounding that its future may not be so rosy. Funding will become even more problematical in the future. The Arts Council have discarded their policy of subsidising minority work in favour of 'The Glory Of The Garden', a system which will favour regional incentives. Clearly, governments find the idea of bringing 'culture' to the regions more appealing than that of funding work which deliberately aims to be subversive. One of the paradoxes of the seventies - government subsidy for theatre which was often vehemently anti-government - may soon become a historical curiosity.

The abolition of the Greater London Council created funding problems for many small theatres and groups who received subsidy from them. GLA (Greater London Arts) plugged the gap to some extent, but controversial anti-racist policies, and funding decisions following from these, have made the organisation look vulnerable to what seems like an inevitable government attack. Most significantly of all, Clause 28 of the Local Government Bill currently passing through Parliament (1988), which makes it illegal for a local authority to 'promote' homosexuality, may place local councils in an impossible position. Funding to any group which produces work with a homosexual element - even 'classics' like Bent or Cat On A Hot Tin Roof - could theoretically be classified

as 'promotion'. Until specific court cases set precedents, the effect of the law is uncertain. What does seem certain, however, is that local authorities will err on the side of caution and cut all funding to gay and lesbian groups.

The future for the gay Fringe looks bleak. Prospects for long-term groups gradually building up a consistent body of work over several years seem especially poor. Initial enthusiasm may see people through the traumas of producing one play or show, but dogged determination and fierce commitment are required to keep a stable, permanent group alive. However, talent does not suddenly run dry just because governments become hostile and new strategies will certainly be developed to get around these problems. The Fringe has been a vital element in the evolution of gay drama in this country and it must be hoped that talented theatre-workers will manage to surmount the difficulties of the next few years and continue to create innovative, fresh, challenging work.

SECTION 6

THE THEATRE OF AIDS

14. THE PARTY'S OVER: THE DRAMA OF AIDS

When AIDS victims first began to die in the United States, both government and press responded in a muted, uninterested way. For instance, during the first nineteen months of the epidemic, which saw close on a thousand diagnosed cases, The New York Times printed a mere seven articles, all hidden deep in the heart of the paper. In comparison, a contemporaneous Tylenol scare which caused seven deaths merited fifty-four articles in three months, four of them on the front page. The amount of public money provided for education and community services in New York, where the epidemic was most fierce, was a derisory $75,000. Research did not begin on the disease until January 1983, eighteen months after it had been officially declared an epidemic. And even when the breakthrough came, and AIDS began to attract publicity, this consisted of vehement attacks on homosexual behaviour and gay lifestyles rather than support for a group suffering the ravages of a fatal disease.

The United States experience ought to have forearmed the authorities in Britain for the arrival of the AIDS virus here a couple of years later, but the American mixture of escapism, prejudice and irrational fear was sadly repeated. A Conservative government consciously promoting itself as the party of decent family standards were placed in a quandary by the need to give out explicit sexual information to homosexuals and drug addicts. Governments of any persuasion do not relish admitting to an epidemic during their own life-time, and one which is constantly being attacked for its record on the National Health Service will

be particularly sensitive. Sometimes evasion has shaded into culpable stupidity. When the Gay Medical Association, tired of the prevarications of the authorities, produced and financed its own information leaflet on the subject in 1982, the Metropolitan Police impounded the printing plates on a charge of obscenity. The disease began to be taken seriously when haemophiliacs started to contract it through contaminated blood products, but its gay victims surfaced only in lurid headlines in the tabloid press. Even as late as 1986, the government showed little sign of taking a more responsible and responsive stance, judging by an incident when the Minister for Health told doctors to 'mind their own business' after they had released a statement criticising the lack of activity by the government, and predicting a bleak future in which AIDS had spread to the heterosexual majority.

All the significant early work disseminating information about AIDS and counselling its victims had to be done by self-help groups. In Britain, the Terrance Higgins Trust grew out of the gay community to become a highly respected organisation offering help and advice to anyone concerned about AIDS. Body Positive is a support group for gay men who are known to carry the AIDS virus (HIV-Positive). In the face of official indifference, or even hostility, gay people were left with no alternative but to organise their own efforts against the disease.

With hardly any information about AIDS on television or in the national press at this time, it fell to the theatre, and particularly Fringe theatre, to react to the new realities created by the disease. The last few years have seen a spate of plays about AIDS, most of them originating from America, the first country in the developed world where the disease made its presence

felt. American work which has been produced in this country includes Louise Kelley's Anti-Body, The Terminal Bar (one of the successes of the 1985 Edinburgh Fringe), Hoffman's As Is, and the most famous AIDS play to date, Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart. But home-grown plays on the subject are starting to emerge, Andy Kirby's Compromised Immunity being given a rehearsed reading at the Gay Sweatshop Times Ten Festival and later produced and toured as a full staged performance. More experimental work has been done by the Event Group with their multi-media show, The Grey Plague, toured around London at the beginning of 1986.

The advent of AIDS has helped to provide a rallying point for right-wing opposition to homosexual rights. In both America and Britain, the popular press has whipped up fear and hysteria concerning the disease. Inaccuracies, lies, selective reporting, moralising and homophobia have been combined to stimulate anti-gay feeling in the general population. If the disease continues to spread and starts to affect the heterosexual majority, as seems almost certain unless a cure or a vaccine is discovered, the threat of a serious backlash against the gay movement must become ever more likely.

Even without pressure from the Right, the gay community will be changed irrevocably by the onslaught of AIDS. The spread of the disease is unquestionably related to the types of sex enjoyed and the frequency of casual sexual contact; the old GLF call for total sexual freedom is being re-evaluated as a result of the AIDS epidemic. There are signs that sexual mores may be changing on the gay scene and that a new morality stressing the value of stable, permanent relationships is starting to challenge the

sexual freedom and experimentation of recent years.

AIDS may have provided a focus for right-wing hostility to homosexual liberation, but equally it has helped gay people to mobilise themselves into collective action. The rat-race individualism of the commercial gay scene, in many ways exacerbated by the social advances of the 1970s, has been softened by the need to unite against a terrible disease. Gay activism has always been most successful when faced with an external threat. In the London of the early 1980s, where one could live a gay life without too much difficulty, even the potential menace of a Mary Whitehouse or a Norman Tebbit seemed somewhat remote to most gays. AIDS has given gay people a rallying point, and organisations like the Terrance Higgins Trust and Body Positive prove that solidarity can often be a fortunate side-effect of great hardship.

Consenting Adults in Public, who have always tried to make their productions an immediate response to events within the gay community, were the first British group to stage a play about AIDS. In December 1983, they produced Louise Kelley's Anti-Body, an American import transferred to an English setting in Cambridge. The play is written in the style of the gay naturalism of the 1980s and contains a collection of typified characters, each of which would be instantly recognisable to people on the gay scene. Vanessa and Becky are radical lesbians quick to point out the unconscious sexism of their male friends; John is an outrageous queen who has discovered the latest fashion for leather and denim; Jeannie and David are two younger gay activists who still have boundless energy and optimism to offer in their work for Gay

Switchboard and campaigning political organisations.

Anti-Body is a straightforward narrative told in a realistic style which places the sufferer of the disease in the role of central character. In this respect, it is typical of most AIDS drama which is very supportive of both gay people and of people with AIDS (PWAs). However, this support has been achieved at the cost of avoiding some of the moral issues surrounding AIDS. Kelley touches on these at some points (as when the lesbian activist criticises the 'meat market' aspects of male gay culture) but seems to draw back from taking a line which might be considered too dogmatic. One of the most important features of GLF thinking was its reaction against the hypocritical strictures of traditional puritanism, and gay people have naturally been extremely wary of censoring anyone on account of his or her sexual behaviour. A rather laissez-faire attitude of each to his (or her) own had become the mood of the late seventies, but AIDS has thrown down a challenge and called this easy-going consensus into question.

Interestingly, the best two plays to date on the subject of AIDS - Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart and William Hoffman's As Is - have tackled the moral implications head-on. One might not necessarily agree with the conclusions they reach, but at least these writers have grasped the nettle. In consequence, their work has bite and direction and develops into more than a sympathetic portrayal of terminal illness.

As with Bent, it is doubtful whether anyone originally involved with The Normal Heart would have predicted its enormous future success. Produced at the Public Theater, New York in 1985, and at the Royal Court in early 1986, The Normal Heart quickly

established itself as the most potent drama to date to result from the AIDS crisis. Its quality and relevance took the play beyond the Fringe to earn critical acclaim on Broadway and the West End.

If sympathy and compassion have been the driving forces behind most AIDS drama, anger is the dominant emotion of The Normal Heart. Its central character, Ned Weeks, is a sort of gay Jimmy Porter, lashing out in anger against the apathy and smugness which surround him. Much of his vitriol is aimed at familiar targets of radical gay theatre. Hostile local authorities:

> I consider our Mayor to be, along with The Times, the biggest enemy gay men and women must contend with in New York. Until the day I die I will never forgive this newspaper and this Mayor for ignoring this epidemic which is killing so many of my friends.[1]

Closet homosexuals:

> I don't agree with you about this. I think it's imperative that we all grow up now and come out of the closet.[2]

The media:

> Have you been following this Tylenol scare? In three months there have been seven deaths, and The Times has written fifty-four articles. The month of October alone they ran one article every single day. Four of them were on the front page. For us - in seventeen months they've written seven puny inside articles. And we have a thousand cases![3]

Homophobes:

> I'm beginning to think that you and your straight world are our enemy. I'm trying to understand why nobody wants to hear we're dying, why nobody wants to help[4]

Many of the play's characters are gay activists who grew up through the Stonewall era and now carry a deep sense of pride in being gay. This impassioned speech which Ned makes to the closeted Bruce could speak for an entire generation of politicised gays:

> The only way we'll have real pride is when we demand recognition of a culture that isn't just sexual. It's all there - all through history we've been there; but we have to claim it, and identify who was in it, and articulate what's in our minds and hearts and all our creative contributions to this earth. And until we do that, and until we organise ourselves block by neighbourhood by city by state into a united visible community that fights back, we're doomed.[5]

This angry side of The Normal Heart is entirely traditional in the sense that gay drama has always railed at heterosexual prejudice and advocated a political response to counter it. Where Kramer differs from other modern gay writers is in plainly speaking against promiscuous sex:

> ... more sex isn't more liberating. And having so much sex makes finding love impossible.[6]

Sexual freedom was one of the central beliefs of GLF and the post-Stonewall era. For many gay men of that period, sleeping with different people was an essential part of a revolution which would liberate not only homosexuals but everyone from the strait-jacket of sexual repression. Non-monogamy became a hegemonic element of the ideological consensus which grew up in the gay community after 1969. However, Kramer argues that this high-minded ideal of free love rapidly degenerated into a meaningless free-for-all:

> I don't consider going to the baths and promiscuous sex making love. I consider it the equivalent of eating junk food, and you can lay off it for a while.[7]

AIDS is bound to call into question the 'free-love' ideals of the previous generation. Many gay men, especially, have found difficulty in readjusting to a lifestyle that does not include lots of casual sex. Kramer suggests in The Normal Heart that this was always a dead-end and that the post-Stonewall generation should have fought 'for the right to get married instead of the right to legitimise promiscuity'.[8]

In the final scene of The Normal Heart, Ned's lover, Felix, lies dying in a hospital bed. His doctor, Emma, and Ned's brother arrive and a short wedding ceremony is performed before Felix's death:

> EMMA: (taking a bible) Dearly beloved we are gathered here together in the sight of God to join together these two men. They love each other very much and want to be married somehow in the presence of their family before Felix dies. I can see no objection. This is my hospital, my church. Do you, Felix -
>
> FELIX: Hurry ...
>
> EMMA: Do you, Felix Turner, take you Ned Weeks ...
>
> FELIX: Alexander.
>
> EMMA: ... to be your ...
>
> FELIX: Lover. My lover. I do.
>
> NED: I do.[9]

The artistic wisdom of this scene is debatable, for it introduces a chunk of American schmaltz into what has been until then a hard-hitting play. (On a personal level, I certainly have

to admit to difficulty in taking the scene as seriously as I was meant to.) However, Kramer must be credited with having the courage of his convictions; having written a play in which he advocates faithfulness and gay marriage, he takes this view to its logical conclusion and actually shows a gay marriage ceremony on stage. Many gay activists will disagree with his implicit moral conclusions, but at least Kramer makes a definite statement. The Normal Heart is the first post-Stonewall play to actively speak out for monogamy and it is a measure of the changes wrought by AIDS that the message found many supporters.

William M. Hoffman's As Is (1985) also charts the changing sexual habits of the gay scene in response to AIDS. But if Kramer looks forward to a new world of sexual exclusiveness, Hoffman looks back with some nostalgia to the 'liberated' days of the seventies. Like many gay men, Saul and Rich went wild in the heady days that followed Stonewall and tried to taste every imaginable kind of sexual experience:

> God, how I love sleaze: the whining self-pity of a rainy Monday night in a leather bar in early spring; five o'clock in the morning in the Mineshaft, with the bathtubs full of men dying to get pissed on and whipped; a subway john full of horny high school students; Morocco - getting raped on a tombstone in Marrakesh.[10]

Far from being unhappily promiscuous, there is no doubt that they miss those pre-AIDS days:

> SAUL: God, I used to love promiscuous sex.
> RICH: Not "promiscuous", Saul, nondirective, noncommitted, nonauthoritarian -
> SAUL: Free, wild, rampant -
> RICH: Hot, sweaty, steamy, smelly -

SAUL: Juicy, funky, hunky -
RICH: Sex.
SAUL: Sex. God, I miss it!"

These crazy, carefree days are contrasted with the realities of disease and death. Both the pleasures of the flesh and the horrors of terminal illness are described in graphic detail in As Is to produce a play which deals with AIDS in a very visceral way. Any play which presents a description of this candour avoids any sentimentality in its approach to terminal illness:

> He's lying there in bed, out of it. He's been out of it since the time we saw him. He's not in any pain, snorting his imaginary cocaine, doing his poppers. Sometimes he's washing his mother's floor, and he's speaking to her in Spanish. Sometimes he's having sex. You can see him having sex right in front of you. He doesn't even know you're there.[12]

The two sets of imagery - disease and pleasure - meet in this striking passage:

> I find myself at the bars and clubs, where I stand around and watch. They remind me of accounts of Europe during the Black Plague: coupling in the dark, dancing till you drop.[13]

The Normal Heart openly censors the gay movement for creating a promiscuous, junk-sex culture. Much of its anger is sprayed at themselves for the sort of lives they lead. As Is does not advocate a return to monogamy or make judgements on male gay culture. It certainly mocks the paraphernalia of leather bars and pseudo-machismo, as when two clones square up to each other in a gay bar and wrestle to see which of them is the more manly, but this is always done with affection, making the scene playful pastiche rather than savage satire. Hoffman avoids moralising by

refusing to attach any blame to AIDS victims for their disease, even if they took part in high-risk sexual behaviour. One feels that he reserves his bitterest anger for the body itself, for Nature or God: 'It's more that I'm angry at God: how can He do this?'.[14]

A hard-hitting play, As Is does not offer the same sentimental relief as The Normal Heart. There is little to do but endure and come to terms with terminal illness. The hospice worker whose speeches open and close the play, and who has counselled many people on their way to death, mocks the grand ideas she once held of herself:

> I was much more idealistic when I started. I had just left the convent. I guess I thought working with the dying would give me spiritual gold stars. I thought I'd be able to impart my great wisdom to those in need of improvement. I wanted to bear witness to dramatic deathbed conversions, see shafts of light emanating from heaven, multicolored auras hovering above the heads of those in the process of expiring. I always imagined they would go out expressing their gratitude for all I had done.[15]

Similarly, Rich is not a noble AIDS victim suffering in painful silence. On the contrary, he:

> throws dishes and curses his roommate and won't cooperate with the doctor and won't see his shrink and isn't interested in support groups and he shit in the fucking bathtub'[16]

There is the ring of truth about Hoffman's portrayal of Rich's evolution from disbelief to rage to 'the bargaining phase',[17] and one senses that this is because Hoffman has personally known many PWAs, as is clear from his introduction to the play.

If anger is what finally saves The Normal Heart from

sentimentality, it is humour which prevents As Is from becoming remorselessly bleak. Its humour is cutting, even cruel, and yet defiant; as long as they make jokes about their condition, AIDS sufferers are literally laughing in the face of adversity. Like camp humour, AIDS humour is ironic and self-deprecating:

> RICH: Say, have you heard about the miracle of AIDS?
> BROTHER: What?
> RICH: It can turn a fruit into a vegetable. What's the worst thing about getting AIDS?
> BROTHER: Stop it!
> RICH: Trying to convince your parents that you're Haitian.[18]

The Normal Heart charts the confusion and fear that hit the New York gay community in the early days of AIDS. Little was known about the disease (the play takes place before the virus had been isolated) and a mood of suppressed panic informs the whole play. The former gay activist, Mickey, finally succumbs to the pressure and cries out against the problems of fighting an enemy about which virtually nothing is known:

> I can't take any more theories. I've written a column about every single one of them. Repeated infection by a virus, new appearance by a dormant virus, single virus, new virus, old virus, multi-virus, partial virus, latent virus, mutant virus, retrovirus ... And we mustn't forget fucking, sucking, kissing, blood, voodoo, drugs, poppers, needles, Africa, Haiti, Cuba, blacks, amoebas, pigs, mosquitoes, monkeys, Uranus! What if it isn't any of them? [19]

The advance in scientific knowledge about AIDS, though, has been rapid, and much more is known about the virus than in the early days. Equally, the gay scene has begun to adjust to life with AIDS. Thus, the mood of As Is is less one of anger than one of resignation. AIDS has forced the gay community to face

mortality head-on; As Is is the fruit of this encounter. Disease and death have given a cutting edge back to a form of drama which was in danger of degenerating into portentous trivialities about failed relationships and unhappy love affairs. Most homosexual and gay drama has concerned itself with the problem of how to cope with life in a heterosexual world; AIDS drama also has to come to terms with the fact of death.

Unfortunately, though, the undeniable importance of AIDS as a subject has had the effect of squeezing out all other issues from gay drama. What was arguably the largest single dramatic advance of the 1980s - the fact that gay theatre had outgrown its need to proselytise in favour of homosexuality and was starting to cover a whole range of subjects - has been rapidly reversed. AIDS is now the central feature of nearly every new gay play being written or performed. This is natural enough in view of the way that AIDS is changing the entire course of gay history, but it leads to an inevitable feeling of pointless repetition. It is also once again associating homosexuality with illness, a connection which drama seemed finally to have overcome.

The two plays studied here in detail - The Normal Heart and As Is - are challenging works of art because they take chances and avoid cliché. However, a large body of AIDS drama is growing up which is far from imaginative or innovative and makes no real demands on its audience.

This falls broadly into two types, both suffering from good intentions. The first paints an entirely likeable portrait of someone with AIDS with the intention of bringing home the fact

that PWAs are ordinary human beings who deserve care and sympathy. Unfortunately, in so doing, these plays tend to edit out all the negative emotions which come with terminal illness - rage, fear, self-pity, cruelty - and yet it is these vivid emotions which form the natural drama of the situation. Part of drama's pleasure comes from watching other people in situations more dangerous and extreme than we would care to go through; witnessing someone glide reasonably towards inevitable death makes for boring theatre.

An American TV-movie called An Early Frost was typical of this type of AIDS drama. This was the story of a young, all-American man who unluckily catches the disease during a rare episode of casual sex; (heroes in this type of play are never promiscuous). Most of the story concerns how this affects his relationship with his parents who did not realise that their son is gay. Initial reactions are harsh, especially from his father, but the family eventually reach reconciliation and come to terms with what is happening to them.

Of course, it is important that plays like this one are broadcast on television and it must not be forgotten that even this unexceptional content probably represented quite a risk for American TV. Television is uniquely important in modern society in shaping people's attitudes, and if this sort of TV-movie causes a lot of people to re-think their ideas about AIDS and PWAs, aesthetic reservations do become much less pertinent. However, some degree of truth does seem to have been sacrificed in the process. The author and director seemed so eager to make the leading character into an acceptable young man that he became rather hollow in the process; it was hard to imagine anyone so

squeaky-clean having sex in the first place! Even more damaging to the play's credibility was the fact that the disease was never made physically unpleasant in any way; this looked more like a bad case of influenza than a bout of AIDS-related pneumonia.

If some texts are rendered innocuous because they are written for the safe mediocrity of the small screen, a different kind of lazy thinking infects AIDS drama on the Fringe. Writers there are fond of apocalyptic visions of nightmarish futures where everyone must carry a green card to prove they do not have the AIDS virus and PWAs are herded off into government-run concentration camps. Max Hafler's Falling Prey, staged at the Man In The Moon pub theatre in 1987, contained the usual Fringe imagery of homophobic police officers, disingenuous government ministers and rabid, Sun-reading heterosexuals.

I do not wish to deny that governments may well impose draconian measures if the AIDS virus continues to spread as it is - governments of all persuasions seem capable of absurdities and monstrosities which beggar belief. However, it seems somewhat unfair to tar the present government with this brush; within the parameters imposed by their own 'Victorian values' propaganda, they have attempted to put out helpful information and have rejected extremist calls for isolation centres and compulsory universal testing. The record of many other governments has certainly been worse.

The central problem of this kind of nightmare scenario is that it simplifies a complex reality into the stuff of melodrama, placing gay men in the role of victims and straight society in the role of villain. Little is said or shown about the personal

reality of contracting AIDS because PWAs become pawns in a political game. Of course, Fringe gay theatre has often spoken politically of gay people as a class rather than as individuals, and there is certainly nothing intrinsically wrong in this. But when an audience is indulged by being shown a cliched vision which appeals to their own prejudices, and, in many ways, avoids the real, complex issues that arise from a subject, the theatre is failing to make people think. The Normal Heart, for all its sentimentality, at least makes gay men question their behaviour and their sexuality; Falling Prey places gay men in the role of righteous victims and therefore nobody in the audience is asked to look at themselves or their own attitudes in any depth. The government are to blame and the audience are all intelligent and sensitive enough to realise this.

The Normal Heart is a warm play and it warmed the hearts of both audiences and critics. On its opening night in London, it received a spontaneous standing ovation. Critics fell over themselves to give their own versions of a standing ovation on the day afterwards:

> Perhaps because it was written from the heart, Larry Kramer's play has more power, more depth and maintains a greater grip on a spellbound audience than any I've seen for a long time.[20]

> Larry Kramer's play is that rare, wondrous theatrical event - a work of utter topicality and transcendent power.[21]

Reviews to As Is were certainly more mixed. The play lacks the sheer emotional power which sweeps Kramer's play along and lifts an audience to an emotional pitch where they will fail to

notice its faults. Some critics welcomed this cooler, more ironic approach:

> Less melodramatic and less preachy than The Normal Heart, Hoffman's piece has a harsh, uneasy humour.[22]

> William M Hoffman's short, vibrant play is less proselytising than The Normal Heart but remains a challenging response to the AIDS crisis, and a pungent specimen of contemporary American drama.[23]

However, Paul Taylor of The Independent complained that the play 'patronises gay men, reducing them to a set of topically thwarted genitals'[24] and Victoria Radin of The New Statesman disliked what she called its 'gooey exploration'[25] of love and illness. A set of highly contradictory reviews often results from a complex script and it is certainly true that Hoffman's mix of irony and commitment, toughness and tears is difficult to categorise under one heading.

AIDS has changed the gay scene and gay drama for the foreseeable future. After the joy of Gay Liberation, the party is over. On a political level, gay people are fighting a revitalised right-wing who want to reverse the advances of the 1960s and 70s. In the theatre, AIDS is making gay drama deal with topics which are far more weighty and universal than those of ten or twenty years ago. The drama of the immediate future will probably be a drama of AIDS. Prediction is a dangerous business, but some attempt must now be made to look at a century of homosexual theatre and predict what the future holds.

CONCLUSION

The history of the depiction of homosexuality on the British stage can be divided into several clearly-defined phases, as long as one remembers that these were never absolute and that a degree of overlap always occurred. These phases were:-

1) A long period during which the concept of a 'homosexual' did not exist. Of necessity, therefore, the drama could not portray homosexual characters. With rare exceptions, such as Edward II and The Relapse, homosexuality was completely shrouded in silence.

2) A few plays with homosexual characters began to emerge, but these were extremely controversial and were often banned. Consequently, most playwrights avoided the subject. The work of homosexual playwrights from this period needs to be studied with autobiographical knowledge in order to see how their sexuality subtly shaped their work.

3) Homosexuality was mentioned very tentatively, with frequent resorts to euphemism and evasion. The most common of these was a false attribution of homosexuality to a character who later turned out to be heterosexual.

4) Homosexuality was at last openly depicted, but misleading and degrading stereotypes stepped on to the stage. Homosexual men were screaming queens, homosexual women were butch dykes. All homosexuals of either gender led tragic, desperate lives.

5) Gay drama was born, as opposed to drama about homosexuals. This happened when gay people, inspired by the ideals of GLF, broke away to create their own separatist drama, often in all-gay groups. These groups concentrated on portraying gay people in a positive light and on exploring the political dimensions of homosexual behaviour.

6) Homosexuals arrived in mainstream drama, which started to approach the subject in an intelligent manner. After the separatism of GLF, a period of integration occurred and homosexuals were depicted in a naturalistic, even flat, way. Male homosexuals became the subject of a large number of plays, but lesbianism remained rare in mainstream drama.

7) The post-AIDS era begins. The subject of AIDS dominates gay drama to the exclusion of all others. A political edge often returns to the work.

Until the advent of AIDS, the portrayal of gay men in drama seemed to be on an inevitable progression from obscurity to integration. The arguments appeared to be won, and it seemed merely a matter of time before the victory spread outwards from the studio spaces and pub theatres to reach the mass media. Homosexuality per se was no longer an issue which could justify an entire play.

The political thrust which energised gay theatre in the early 1970s had almost run its course. Only on the Fringe were plays being performed which still dealt with homosexuals as a political class: elsewhere, the 'boy next door' became the standard hero of homosexual drama. It seemed somewhat pointless to write plays arguing for the basic right to do as one wished with one's own body; in Britain, at least, that freedom existed for most people in their everyday lives. Also, Bent had surely scaled this pinnacle with enormous success, making repetition redundant. Agit-prop looked old-fashioned in a world where gay naturalism drew the finest details of real life for homosexuals in the 1980s.

AIDS changed all this. It shattered the new liberal consensus which accepted homosexuality, and halted the trend towards integration. The male gay scene, traditionally young and affluent and easy-going, suddenly had to face up to mortality in its midst. The responsibilities that go with sexual behaviour came home with a vengeance. Right-wing opponents of homosexual reform, who had been forced on to the defensive since the Second World War, seized the chance to make capital out of suffering and

death, claiming that the disease was the wrath of an all-loving God. An atmosphere was created where discriminatory measures could be pushed through Parliament without too much difficulty. Gay people were suddenly struggling to hang on to the advances they had made in the recent past.

Predicting the future of gay history and of gay drama is a dangerous business, as the completely unpredictable arrival of AIDS proves. However, it seems safe to assume that AIDS will continue to dominate gay drama for a short while, after which the subject will begin to become integrated into the larger body of gay work. If the disease spreads to the heterosexual majority (and not just, as at present, to specific groups like haemophiliacs and drug addicts) the current association of AIDS and homosexuality will slowly fade, and dramas about heterosexual victims of the virus will make their way to the stage. The historical effect of AIDS on gay drama will ultimately depend on whether a cure or vaccine is developed, and how quickly. Already there are signs that sexual mores are changing in response to the disease, and the personal conflicts arising out of this need to adapt to new circumstances will presumably fuel many of the best gay plays of the next ten years.

More difficult to assess is the impact of the current right-wing backlash against gay rights, and, in particular, the ramifications of Clause 28. In theory, this new law to prevent local authorities from 'promoting' homosexuality or showing gay people in a 'pretended

family relationship' could end all council sponsorship for theatre groups or theatres which stage any play openly depicting homosexual people. The idea that grants may be removed for staging Bent or Cat On A Hot Tin Roof seems absurd, but it exists as a theoretical possibility and councils are certain to become more cautious in their funding decisions. Already, the grant given to OutCast Theatre Company (Consenting Adults in Public) is being reviewed in the light of Clause 28.

At this stage, it is impossible to make an informed guess as to the overall effect of Clause 28, since so much will depend on the first test cases which come up before the courts and how the word 'promote' is interpreted in these cases. If the word is interpreted in a very broad sense, a situation could eventually emerge where all books with reference to homosexuality are removed from library shelves and all plays banned from the subsidised stage. If it is interpreted in a narrow sense, Clause 28 may well turn out to be an irrelevance which has very little actual effect on the arts.

In more general terms, the strength of the backlash against gay people is equally hard to predict. One can argue that ten years of right-wing government has done very little to halt the development of a gay community in Britain. On the other hand, there seems to be a sizeable element of the present Conservative party who will not be satisfied until homosexuality is once more criminalised, and further anti-gay legislation seems likely in the future. How far they can succeed seems

limited, in the sense that hundreds of plays and thousands of books have now been written about homosexuality from a positive viewpoint. The genie is out of the bottle, and, short of a neo-Fascist government burning mountains of books, it is hard to imagine how the advances of the post-war years can be reversed.

The effects of Clause 28 and future anti-gay legislation will almost certainly be more subtle. Most likely to be hardest hit are those groups like Gay Sweatshop and OutCast who openly make an issue of their aim to advance gay rights. These will need to develop alternative strategies for funding if they are to survive. On the other hand, there are already signs that discriminatory measures are actually having the opposite effect to the one which their sponsors desired and that they are energising gay drama on the Fringe. Equally, once Clause 28 takes effect and local authorities begin to be hauled in front of the courts, the resulting publicity may advance rather than retard the gay movement in Britain.

Theatre is increasingly becoming an international phenomenon as the year 2000 approaches. Therefore, even if the authorities in Britain do manage to suppress the production of gay drama here, there will continue to be a flow of interesting new work from abroad, particularly from the States. Britain must continue to encourage this material if it is not to become a cultural backwater. Since London's tourist trade leans heavily on the city's reputation as the world's theatre centre, governments are

unlikely to place too many shackles on its drama.

Television and radio, though, will come under more pressure to toe the line, a process which has already begun with the creation of a regulatory body to monitor the portrayal of sex and violence on TV. Since this body will be given the power to preview and censor work before it appears on the screen, this is effectively the re-birth of the Lord Chamberlain in a different medium. I have little doubt that this will effectively mark the demise of homosexuality in television drama. The old two-tier system will emerge in a new form; where once the select few went to theatre clubs to watch what they could not see in public theatres, the theatre-going élite will now be shown a range of subjects not allowed on the small screen.

This can only exacerbate the recent trend which has seen certain styles of gay drama become enormously successful while others are left to languish in obscurity on the Fringe. The fragile link which occasionally enabled a play such as Bent to bridge the two worlds will all but disappear. Exciting and challenging new work will be stimulated by political pressure, but will be isolated within its own tiny universe, the vast majority of people remaining completely unaware of its existence.

The prospects for lesbian theatre are even less rosy. Before AIDS and the right-wing revival, it seemed that lesbian drama simply had some catching up to do, but that, given enough time, lesbian work would also emerge from the shadows of the Fringe to impinge on the

national consciousness. But the discrimination made possible because of AIDS has also blighted the lesbian community, even though lesbians are the lowest-risk group of all (with the exception of celibates). Lesbian drama has been, in one sense, stillborn; the genre has been artificially truncated before it has had a chance to realise anything like its full potential.

Events in Britain during the 1980s - the seizure of books from Gays The Word by H.M. Customs, various police raids on gay pubs, the AIDS hysteria, Clause 28 - seem to point the way towards a depressing future. Homosexual rights are clearly under attack and, in such an atmosphere, gay drama is unlikely to develop in the unfettered fashion of the last fifteen years. And yet the long-term prospects still seem to this author to be optimistic. It is worth remembering that gay drama has emerged from nothing within a century; one should never under-estimate the huge gap between the complete silence of Victorian England and the West End plays of the late 1970s. In this century, gay drama has had to act as a vehicle for propaganda and as a reflector of gay society. These two tasks remain. Gay people must continue to fight to penetrate the mass media, to stage Bent at their local rep and to reach the West End. But there must also be a body of work growing out of the gay scene itself, speaking directly to gay women and men about their victories, defeats, problems, hopes and fears.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Kinsey's survey states that 37% of white, North American males have had same-gender sexual experience to the point of orgasm. His figures have been criticised on the grounds that his sample is biased and does not include some groups at all (e.g. negroes). However, whilst allowing for the specificity of Kinsey's statistics, and recognising the danger of making unfounded extrapolations from them, they certainly proved that male homosexual contact is far more common in urban Anglo-Saxon society than generally realised.

2. It may sound like a feat of mental gymnastics to engage in frequent homosexual experiences and yet still not think of oneself as homosexual, but this attitude is far from rare. Many men who have sex with other men would not call themselves homosexual as long as they do not take the passive role in sodomy. Others confuse male homosexuality with effeminacy or cross-dressing. The imprecision of the concept 'homosexual' allows various types of rationalisation to occur.

3. Kinsey used a seven-point scale from 0 - 6. A score of 6 indicated an 'exclusive homosexual' and a score of 0 an 'exclusive heterosexual'. At least this system prevented the creation of two mutually-exclusive sexual groups and enabled a reasonably precise categorisation of sexual behaviour to take place. The

usefulness of any system based solely on behaviour, though, is limited because it cannot allow for qualitative differences between sexual contacts.

4. Until recently, the gay movement itself tended to accept this basic essentialism. Gay activists saw past historical periods as a time when a group of people, 'homosexuals', were forced to conceal their 'real' nature from public view. Instead of grappling with the complex web of sexual symbolism existing in each historical period, this reduced everything to a crude model of repression. The logical conclusion of this way of thinking must be that homosexuality is a biological constant given to a minority of people at birth rather than a potentiality existing within everyone.

5. Kenneth Plummer, The Making of the Modern Homosexual (London, 1981).

6. Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out (London, 1977).

7. In truth, it could be called a Golden Age for male members of the free classes only. Greek society was rigidly hierarchical and deeply patriarchal. Little is known about lesbianism, or the sexual mores that existed outside Athens' ruling elite. Interestingly, male homosexuality has often been tolerated, even encouraged, in other intensely patriarchal societies - the Japan of the Samurai, the courts of the Middle East, the clans of the Norse warriors. In these societies, a glorification of the male role seems to have led to a legitimisation of male homosexual sex. In all of them, though, taking the passive (female) role

was seen as demeaning for a man and led to a loss of respect. (For a more detailed analysis, see Phallòs by Thorkil Vanggaard (London, 1972).

8. Quote from Thorkil Vanggaard, Phallòs (London, 1972).

9. Plato, The Symposium, translated by Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth, 1951), p. 62.

10. Greek sexual roles seem to have been more flexible than ours while gender roles were more rigid.

11. In Britain, too, a succession of spy scandals linked male homosexuality with treachery and Communism in the public mind.

12. Our view of Marlowe relies heavily on the testament of the informer, Richard Baines, and needs to be judged carefully on that account. See Alan Bray, Homosexuality in Renaissance England (London, 1982), pp. 20-21 and pp. 117-118.

13. Homosexuality in Renaissance England, pp. 28-31.

14. See H. Montgomery Hyde, The Other Love (London, 1970), pp. 31-32.

15. It may not have been institutionalised in the sense of being officially recognised, but Alan Bray is convincing in his contention that it was tolerated in silence.

16. As companies of actors were all-male until the Restoration, it is hardly surprising that they should gain a reputation for homosexuality.

17. Christopher Marlowe, Edward II, edited by J.B. Steane (Harmondsworth, 1969), Act 1, Scene 4, Line 404.

18. The important role that the rediscovery of Greek culture played in Renaissance England may seem to have been under-estimated. However, it must be stressed that the drama - especially in the days of Marlowe - was a popular form aimed at a mass audience.

19. William Shakespeare, As You Like It, edited by A.W. Verity (London, 1943), Act 1, Scene 3, Lines 69-72.

20. As You Like It, Act 1, Scene 3, Line 82.

21. Whether all these relationships were, in fact, platonic is debatable. They may have been assumed platonic because society could not conceive of women possessing sexuality independent of men.

22. On the authorship of Sodom, see Homosexuality in Renaissance England, page 119. The apparent daring of the play must be set against the fact that it was staged as a private entertainment for a small, elitist audience.

23. Homosexuality in Renaissance England, pp. 119-120.

24. John Vanbrugh, The Relapse, edited by Bernard Harris (London, 1971), Act 1, Scene 3, Line 183.

25. The sexual morality of Restoration comedy may appear lax, but sexual standards still exist. The young deserve the young, and the efforts of old people to court them are always depicted as ridiculous. Consider, for instance, the attempts of Pinchwife to keep Horner and his wife apart in The Country Wife. Clearly, our sympathies are meant to go with Horner because he is young and it is proper and natural for young people to want each other sexually.

26. Homosexuality in Renaissance England, pp. 130-131.

27. An anonymous publication of 1810, called The Phoenix of Sodom, described the scandalous events at a public house called The White Swan. For more details, see The Other Love, pp. 79-82.

28. It can be argued that a homosexual subculture began earlier, at least as far back as the molly houses. The intricacies of this debate need not concern us too deeply, since the medical identity of 'homosexual' clearly dates from around 1860. For a discussion of the arguments, see Homosexuality in Renaissance England, pp. 134-137.

29. The phrase is Wilde's own.

30. The Other Love, p. 120.

31. Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Volume One: An Introduction (London, 1979), p. 43.

32. Ulrichs categorised human males into three groups: a) the normal man, or dioning, b) the urning, and c) the urano-dioning, equivalent to what we would now call heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual. He further divided urnings (homosexuals) into a) the männling (who is entirely masculine in appearance), b) the weibling (who is effeminate), c) the zwischen-urning (an intermediate type), and d) the 'virilized' urning (an urning who acquires the 'normal' habit).

As can be seen, Ulrichs' simple third-sex hypothesis burst at the seams in his attempt to accommodate behavioural reality. It shows the strength of the age's biological determinism that Ulrichs still clung to his theories of physical causation in spite of the fact that empirical evidence made him aware that people could alter their sexual behaviour according to circumstances.

33. The importance of Darwinism in the late 19th century as an intellectual concept (as opposed to a biological theory) cannot be under-estimated. In all fields, this led to an attempt to replace moral explanations of phenomena with

causal and scientific ones.

34. Broadly equivalent to the Labouchère Amendment in England, Paragraph 175 made all male homosexual contact illegal in Germany from 1871 onwards. As in England, female homosexuality was never criminalised. Thus, at a time when most of Europe was liberalising its laws on homosexuality, following the Napoleonic Code instituted after the Revolution in France, England and Germany were extending their laws against homosexual behaviour. The effect of this, though, was to publicise homosexuality and, ironically, these countries were the two which produced the main impetus behind the early homosexual rights movement.

35. This scandal, which threatened the political stability of the whole country, erupted when a weekly newspaper implied the existence of a homosexual coterie around the Kaiser. During this spell, German newspapers whipped up anti-homosexual feeling in the country.

36. Frank Wedekind, Pandora's Box, translated by Stephen Spender (London, 1952), Authors Foreword.

37. Pandora's Box, Authors Foreword.

38. Pandora's Box, Act 2, p. 138.

39. Pandora's Box, Act 2, p. 149.

40. Pandora's Box, Authors Foreword.

41. Pandora's Box, Act 3, p. 175.

42. Frank Wedekind, Spring Awakening, translated by Tom Osborn (London, 1969), Act 3, Scene 6, p. 75.

43. Spring Awakening, Act 3, Scene 6, p. 75.

44. Spring Awakening, Act 3, Scene 6, p. 75.

CHAPTER ONE

1. The Criminal Law Amendment Act was primarily drawn up in an attempt to curtail child prostitution, and only Section 11, introduced as an amendment by Henry Labouchère during discussion of the Bill, mentioned homosexuality. Sodomy was still illegal under the statute of Henry VIII, although no longer punishable by death after 1861. The Criminal Law Amendment extended the range of homosexual offences between men, and its extremely vague wording did not help matters. 'Acts of gross indecency' could cover anything from a hand on the shoulder to fellatio.

2. Among the many disorders masturbation was supposed to cause were insanity, headache, epilepsy, acne, asthma, heart disease, deafness, blindness, incontinence, warts,

hallucinations, skin disease and smelliness. Even most doctors believed this. As well as psychic warfare, masturbation was prevented by more physical methods, particularly on adolescent boys. For example, there were boards which could secure a boy's hands and which parents could lock at night, preventing the boy from masturbating in bed.

3. A book from 1904, Bernarr Macfadden's Superb Virility of Manhood*, gives an intriguing glimpse of turn-of-the-century attitudes towards homosexuality:

(* 1904, Spotswood, New Jersey

> the hideous mystery of sexual perversion ... violates the fundamental principle of Creation - the attraction of sex to sex. It is the carrion fruit of a putrid mentality. It outrages in filthy fashion the laws of man and God ... repulsive horror ... the degenerate almost always fills a suicide's grave or a cell in an insane asylum.

A brief historical resumé of homosexuality through the ages follows, in which it is blamed for the collapse of Athens, Rome, the Crusades and 'the Oriental nations'. There is a lurid exposé of 'the shoals of painted, perfumed, Kohl-eyed, lisping, mincing youths that at night swarm on Broadway in the Tenderloin section or haunt the parks and 5th avenue, ogling every man that passes.'. Macfadden then goes on to explain 'sex perversity'. The causes are manifold: pre-natal influences originating in too much sexual activity on the part of the pregnant mother; an excessive indulgence in 'natural' passions leading to satiety and a yearning for the 'un-natural'; all-male institutions like the Army and boarding schools; stimulants such as morphine, chloral, opium and cocaine. ('Indeed

it is a safe assertion to make that nearly every one of these wretched creatures is a "dope fiend" of some sort or the other').

Suggested solutions are 'Cold baths of all types, much exercise, light meals, sleeping in the open air if possible and ... "shock tactics", such as electricity, boxing, fencing, and so forth.'.

It is especially chastening to realise that this book represented contemporary enlightened opinion. At innumerable points, Macfadden apologises for even mentioning 'sex perversity' and puts his views forward as a modern, rational approach to sexuality.

4. Trials of Oscar Wilde, edited by H. Montgomery Hyde (London, 1948), p. 339.

5. Trials of Oscar Wilde, p. 329.

6. The Labouchère Amendment of the 1885 Act was dubbed 'the blackmailer's charter'.

7. Quoted from Michael Meyer, Ibsen (Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 686.

8. Oscar Wilde, Lady Windermere's Fan, Act 3, p. 37. (All Wilde plays are quoted from the Bantam Drama Edition, first published 1961, introduction by Hesketh Pearson.)

9. Oscar Wilde, A Woman of No Importance, Act 4, p. 114.

10. Oscar Wilde, An Ideal Husband, Act 1, p. 141.

11. An Ideal Husband, Act 2, p. 154.

12. Lady Windermere's Fan, Act 2, p. 26.

13. The affair began when the Marquess of Queensberry, father of Lord Alfred Douglas, sent a card to Wilde's club on which he wrote "To Oscar Wilde posing as a somdomite (sic)". Wilde instigated legal proceedings for libel, but eventually withdrew his prosecution half way through the trial on the advice of his solicitor. A warrant was issued for Wilde's arrest under Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act. At the next trial, the jury were unable to reach a verdict, and it took a third trial before Wilde was finally convicted and sentenced to two years hard labour, the maximum penalty for the offence.

14. An Ideal Husband, Act 1, p. 141.

15. An Ideal Husband, Act 1, p. 142.

16. Trials of Oscar Wilde, p. 236.

17. The play was officially banned under a law forbidding the dramatisation of biblical subjects on the English stage. One can only surmise whether this was merely a convenient

excuse to ban a work with explicit references to sexuality.

18. Oscar Wilde, Salomé, p. 297.

19. Mordaunt Shairp, The Green Bay Tree (London, 1933) Act 1, Scene 1, p. 55. (Quoted from Gay Plays, introduced by Michael Wilcox (London, 1984).)

20. The Green Bay Tree, Act 1, Scene 1, p. 55.

21. The Green Bay Tree, Act 1, Scene 1, p. 55.

22. The Green Bay Tree, Act 1, Scene 1, p. 55.

23. The Green Bay Tree, Act 1, Scene 1, p. 55.

24. The Green Bay Tree, Act 1, Scene 1, p.55.

25. The Green Bay Tree, Act 1, Scene 1, p. 55.

26. The Green Bay Tree, Act 1, Scene 1, p. 56.

27. Theatre melodrama was still a popular form at this time, even if it had declined from its Victorian heyday.

28. Introduction to The Green Bay Tree in Gay Plays, p. 53.

29. The Green Bay Tree, Act 2, Scene 1, p. 73.

30. The Green Bay Tree, Act 2, Scene 1, p. 76.

31. The Green Bay Tree, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 94.

32. Ms. West refused to publish her two plays, The Drag (1927) and The Pleasure Man (1928), both of which contained gay characters. She did, however, grant access to them to William M. Hoffman, who discusses them briefly in his introduction to Gay Plays, The First Collection (New York, 1979), pp. xvi-xviii.

33. The New York Times, 2 October, 1928.

34. Variety, 1 February, 1927.

35. Variety, 1 February, 1927.

36. Quoted from Introduction to Gay Plays, The First Collection.

37. The Green Bay Tree, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 92.

38. The Green Bay Tree, Act 3, Scene 2, p. 97.

39. The Green Bay Tree, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 95.

40. The Green Bay Tree, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 95.

41. The Green Bay Tree, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 93.

42. A play called Two Friends, by Gray and Raffalovich, had a single matinee performance at the Prince of Wales Theatre in 1916. This was the story of a man being blackmailed because of his homosexuality. Unfortunately, all my efforts to track down the script have proved unsuccessful.

43. For more details, see We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians by Kaier Curtin (Boston, 1987).

44. Michel Foucault, The History of Sex; Volume One: An Introduction (London, 1979), p. 43.

45. The Green Bay Tree, Act 2, Scene 2, p. 88.

46. The Green Bay Tree, Act 2, Scene 1, p. 76.

47. Quoted from Trials of Oscar Wilde, p. 236.

48. The Green Bay Tree, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 94.

49. The Green Bay Tree, Act 1, Scene 1, p. 60.

50. A.E. Wilson, The Star, 26 January, 1933.

51. J.T. Grein, The Sketch, 8 February, 1933.

52. J.T. Grein, The Sketch, 8 February, 1933.

53. J.T. Grein, The Sketch, 8 February, 1933.

54. New Statesman and Nation, 4 February, 1933.

CHAPTER TWO

1. It is often impossible to attribute a particular piece of feminist theory to a single source, as feminism is the product of a general social movement. Among the writers to whom I owe thanks for the ideas in this chapter are Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Kate Millett and Margaret Mead.
Indeed, many feminists would argue that the collective nature of feminist thinking is one of its most important intellectual advances. Unlike traditional intellectual movements, which are structured like the members of a patriarchal family, with a 'founder' passing the word on to several 'disciples' (Marxism, Freudianism) feminism is essentially a collective discipline. It emphasises the pooling of knowledge and the mutual learning that takes place in all relationships.

2. The Other Love, p. 179.

3. The Other Love, p. 185.

4. Percy Stone, Bourdet Didn't Try To Shock When He Wrote

'The Captive', New York Herald Tribune, 12 December, 1926.

5. Edouard Bourdet, The Captive, translated by Arthur Hornblow Jr. (New York, 1926), Act 2, p. 170.

6. Brooklyn Times, 30 September, 1926.

7. The Captive, Act 2, p. 145.

8. The Captive, Act 2, p. 150.

9. The Captive, Act 2, p. 171.

10. Arthur Hornblow, Mr Hornblow Goes to the Play, Theatre Magazine, December 1926, p. 16.

11. New York Evening Telegraph, 30 September, 1926.

12. Quoted from William M. Hoffman, Introduction to Gay Plays, The First Collection.

13. Lillian Hellman, The Children's Hour (New York, 1934), Act 2, Scene 2, p. 43.

14. The Children's Hour, Act 2, Scene 2, p. 44.

15. The Children's Hour, Act 2, Scene 2, p. 46.

16. The Children's Hour, Act 2, Scene 2, p. 47.

17. The Children's Hour, Act 2, Scene 2, p. 46.

18. The Children's Hour, Act 2, Scene 2, p. 47.

19. The Children's Hour, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 56.

20. The Children's Hour, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 65.

21. The Children's Hour, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 65.

22. The Children's Hour, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 66.

23. The Children's Hour, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 66.

24. The Children's Hour, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 66.

25. The Children's Hour, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 67.

26. Introduction to Gay Plays, The First Collection.

27. Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, 21 November, 1934.

INTRODUCTION TO SECTION 2

1. For instance, in 1954 The Sunday Times ran an editorial advocating changes in the law. At the other extreme, in

1952, The Sunday Pictorial did an exposé of 'mincing, effeminate young men who call themselves queers'.

2. Most notably, Leo Abse in the House of Commons and Lord Arran in the House of Lords.

3. Decriminalisation did not apply to Scotland or Northern Ireland, nor to the Armed Forces, where a person suspected of homosexual acts could still be convicted under martial law. The age of consent was fixed at 21. It must also be stressed that sexual acts had to take place 'in private'. This meant that gay men could still be prosecuted for offences committed in public toilets, cars, parks, waste land, cinemas, etc. and for sex involving more than two people.

4. For further information, see The Other Love, pp. 216-228.

5. See Coming Out by Jeffrey Weeks.

6. In 1737, Sir Robert Walpole rushed through a Bill giving the Lord Chamberlain the legal power to vet and license all stage plays in order to protect himself from satire. However, the office of Lord Chamberlain effectively goes back to the Elizabethan theatre, when a play was more likely to be censored for political rather than sexual content. Hence, A Game At Chess (a political allegory) merited the attentions of the censor whilst Edward II

(homosexuality) and 'Tis Pity She's A Whore (incest) did not.

7. Many of the best foreign plays of this century were only performed in Britain by means of this subterfuge. The Children's Hour and Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, for instance, were first performed here in private members' clubs.

CHAPTER THREE

1. Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire (Harmondsworth, 1959), Scene 6, pp. 182-183.

2. A Streetcar Named Desire, Scene 6, p. 183.

3. Tennessee Williams, Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (New York, 1955), Act 2, p. 98.

4. Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, Act 2, p. 102.

5. Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, Act 2, p. 103.

6. Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, Act 2, p. 105.

7. Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, Act 2, p. 107.

8. Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, Act 2, p. 108.

9. Homophobia has been defined as an extreme and irrational fear and hatred of homosexuality. As far as I am aware, the term was first used by Dennis Altman in his book, Homosexual Oppression and Liberation (London, 1971).

10. Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, Act 3, p. 196.

11. Arthur Miller, A View From The Bridge (New York, 1955), Act 1, p. 117.

12. A View From The Bridge, Act 1, p. 118.

13. Robert Anderson, Tea and Sympathy (New York, 1953), Act 1, p. 48.

14. Tea and Sympathy, Act 3, p. 159.

15. Tea and Sympathy, Act 2, Scene 2, p. 120.

16. Tea and Sympathy, Act 2, Scene 2, p. 121.

17. Tea and Sympathy, Act 2, Scene 1, p. 97.

18. Tea and Sympathy, Act 3, p. 151.

19. Tea and Sympathy, Act 3, p. 151.

20. Tea and Sympathy, Act 3, p. 151.

21. Tea and Sympathy, Act 3, p. 153.

22. Tea and Sympathy, Act 3, p. 153.

23. Tea and Sympathy, Act 3, p. 153.

24. Tea and Sympathy, Act 3, p. 150.

25. John McClain, Journal American, 1 October, 1953.

26. John Chapman, Daily News, 25 March, 1955.

27. John McClain, Journal American, 25 March, 1955.

28. John McClain, Journal American, 25 March, 1955.

CHAPTER FOUR

1. For more detailed information on these plays, see A Survey of the Treatment of the Homosexual in Some Plays by Roger Gellert, Encore, January/February 1961.

2. J.C. Trewin, Introduction to Plays of the Year 12 (London, 1955).

3. Aristotle, Poetics. (Quoted from preface to South in Plays of the Year 12.)

4. Aristotle, Poetics.

5. Julien Green, South (London, 1955), Act 3, Scene 1, p. 181. (All quotes taken from Plays of the Year 12).

6. South, Act 1, Scene 1, p. 112.

7. South, Act 1, Scene 5, p. 151.

8. South, Act 2, Scene 2, p. 159.

9. South, Act 2, Scene 4, p. 172.

10. South, Act 2, Scene 4, p. 172.

11. South, Act 2, Scene 4, p. 175.

12. South, Act 2, Scene 4, p. 175.

13. South, Act 2, Scene 4, p. 177.

14. South, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 188.

15. South, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 190.

16. Aristotle, Poetics.

17. South, Act 3, Scene 2, p. 201.

18. South, Act 3, Scene 2, p. 200.

19. Philip King, Serious Charge (London, 1955), Act 2, Scene 2, p. 580. (All quotes taken from Plays of the Year 11 (London, 1955).)

20. Serious Charge, Act 2, Scene 2, p. 575.

21. Serious Charge, Act 1, Scene 1, p. 504.

22. Serious Charge, Act 2, Scene 2, p. 583.

23. Serious Charge, Act 2, Scene 2, p. 583.

24. Benedick Scott, The Lambs of God, Act 1, Scene 1. (The script is not available to the general public and all quotes are taken from a copy at the Mitchell Library, Glasgow.)

25. The Lambs of God, Act 3, Scene 1.

26. The Lambs of God, Act 3, Scene 1.

27. Quote taken from Gay Scotland, May/June, 1984.

28. Gay Scotland, May/June, 1984.

29. The Lambs of God, Act 1, Scene 1.

30. The Lambs of God, Act 1, Scene 1.

31. The Lambs of God, Act 1, Scene 1.

32. The Lambs of God, Act 1, Scene 1.

33. The Lambs of God, Act 1, Scene 1.

CHAPTER FIVE

1. In 1961, Dirk Bogarde played a homosexual man in Victim, the story of someone threatened with blackmail on account of his homosexuality. The film was notable for its central character, who was depicted as an ordinary, respectable, responsible member of society. Two screen versions of the Wilde trials were produced at roughly the same time. Many 'homosexual' plays made it into celluloid during this decade (although sometimes changed to make their content less daring!) - Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, Suddenly Last Summer, A Taste of Honey, The Killing of Sister George, Staircase, The Boys in the Band. Lesbianism was featured in The Group (1965) and The Fox (1968). By 1969, attitudes had relaxed so much that homosexual fellatio could be depicted in Midnight Cowboy.

2. The Home Secretary, Sir D. Maxwell Fyfe, could say that 'Homosexuals, in general, are exhibitionists and proselytisers and a danger to others, especially the young'. (Quoted from The Other Love)

3. Pandora's Box, Act 2, p. 138.

4. Heterosexism is the unconscious sexual hegemony which causes all relationships to be seen in heterosexual terms. For example, a person is assumed heterosexual until s/he states otherwise. Similarly, homosexual relationships are expected to follow the model of the nuclear family: exclusive, monogamous and dominant/submissive.

5. In many parts of the world, homosexuals partners still model themselves on male/female relationships. For instance, a friend from Guyana tells of homosexual marriages which she remembers from her childhood there. These were important local events that people travelled miles to see. One partner dressed as a 'man' and the other dressed as a 'woman'. The priest then joined the couple in marriage as long as he could pretend not to realise that both partners were male. There was no concept of a homosexual relationship not based on this model. Nor were there any such thing as lesbian relationships - at least on an official level.

6. R.H., Theatre World, June, 1965, p.28.

7. Michael Billington, Plays and Players, August, 1965, p. 38.

8. Filmed by Twentieth Century Fox in 1967, starring Richard Burton and Rex Harrison.

9. The Times, 3 November, 1966.

10. One rare exception was the figure of Ed in Entertaining Mr Sloane (1964), who is not at all effeminate nor in any sense a victim. Unlike most of the other authors of the period, Orton was writing from personal experience, which made his portrayal less stereotyped and more truthful.

11. Lanford Wilson, The Madness of Lady Bright (New York, 1965), p. 178. (Quotes taken from Gay Plays, The First Collection.)

12. The Madness of Lady Bright, p. 197.

13. The Madness of Lady Bright, p. 188.

14. Charles Dyer, Staircase (Harmondsworth, 1966), Act 1, Scene 1, p. 16.

15. Staircase, Act 2, p. 85.

16. Staircase, Act 2, p. 60.

17. Staircase, Act 2, p. 79.

18. Staircase, Authors Note.

19. Mart Crowley, The Boys in the Band (Harmondsworth, 1968), Act 2, p. 91.

20. The Boys in the Band, Dramatis Personae.

21. The Boys in the Band, Act 2, p. 78.

22. The Boys in the Band, Act 2, p. 78.

23. The Boys in the Band, Act 2, p.90.

24. The Boys in the Band, Act 2, p. 91.

25. Frank Marcus, The Killing of Sister George (London, 1965), Act 2, Scene 1, p. 33.

26. The Killing of Sister George, Act 2, Scene 1, p. 36.

27. The Killing of Sister George, Act 2, Scene 1, p. 33.

28. New York Times, 15 April, 1968.

29. Richard Watts Jr., New York Post, 15 April, 1968.

30. Michael Billington, Plays and Players, August 1965, p. 38.

CHAPTER SIX

1. R.B. Marriott, The Stage, July 8, 1965.

2. John Osborne, A Patriot For Me (London, 1966), Appendix.

3. A Patriot For Me, Appendix.

4. A Patriot For Me, Act 3, Scene 1, p. 101.

5. A Patriot For Me, Act 3, Scene 5, p. 119.

6. F.S., Theatre World, August, 1965.

7. A Patriot For Me, Act 2, Scene 1, p. 82.

8. A Patriot For Me, Act 2, Scene 1, p. 77.

9. A Patriot For Me, Act 2, Scene 1, p. 72.

10. A Patriot For Me, Act 2, Scene 1, p. 89.

11. A Patriot For Me, Act 2, Scene 1, p. 72.

12. A Patriot For Me, Act 2, Scene 1, p. 72.

13. R.B. Marriott, The Stage, 8 July, 1965.

CHAPTER SEVEN

1. Published by Methuen (London) Ltd., in 1986, edited by John Lahr.

2. John Lahr, Prick Up Your Ears (Harmondsworth, 1978), p. 187.

3. Prick Up Your Ears, p. 187.

4. Joe Orton, Loot (London, 1967), Act 1, p. 200. (All Orton quotes taken from The Complete Plays (London, 1976).)

5. Joe Orton, What The Butler Saw (London, 1969), Act 1, p. 373.

6. What The Butler Saw, Act 2, p. 409.

7. What The Butler Saw, Act 2, p. 413.

8. What The Butler Saw, Act 1, p. 373.

9. Orton certainly disliked the political playwrights of his own period like Arden and Wesker. The only contemporaneous British playwright for whom he expressed enthusiasm was Harold Pinter.

10. Brendan Behan, The Hostage (London, 1958), Act 3, p. 97.

11. John Herbert, Fortune and Men's Eyes (New York, 1967), Act 2, p. 70. (All quotes taken from Open Space Plays (Harmondsworth, 1974).)

12. Fortune and Men's Eyes, Act 2, p. 71.

13. Fortune and Men's Eyes, Act 2, p. 71.

14. Fortune and Men's Eyes, Act 2, p. 74.

15. In male organisations in which discipline is seen as vitally important, homosexuality is always strictly taboo and generally punished: prison, the Armed Forces, single-sex schools. This is because strong emotional relationships create an attachment to an individual rather than loyalty to an institution. Ironically, of course, these settings increase the likelihood of same-gender sexual contacts even as they outlaw them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

1. Jill Posener, Any Woman Can (London, 1984), p. 1.

2. Roger Baker and Drew Griffiths, Mister X (London, 1984), Part 1, p. 1.

3. Mister X, Part 1, p. 2.

4. The lunch-time season ran from February 17th to June 28th, 1975. The plays were:

LIMITATIONS by John Roman Baker
THINKING STRAIGHT by Laurence Collinson
SHIPS by Alan Wakeman

FRED AND HAROLD by Robert Patrick

ONE PERSON by Robert Patrick

PASSING BY by Martin Sherman

In the evenings, THE HAUNTED HOST, by Robert Patrick, was performed from May 19th to June 28th.

5. Introduction to Any Woman Can.

6. Introduction to Any Woman Can.

7. Any Woman Can, p. 17.

8. Any Woman Can, p. 17.

9. Mister X, Part 6, p. 27.

10. Mister X, Part 6, p. 35.

11. Introduction to Any Woman Can.

12. D.F.B., The Stage, 11 March, 1976.

13. D.F.B., The Stage, 30 September, 1976.

14. Noel Greig and Drew Griffiths, As Time Goes By (London, 1977), Scene 1, p. 13.

15. As Time Goes By, Scene 4, p. 28.

16. As Time Goes By, Scene 12, p. 61.

17. As Time Goes By, Scene 13, p. 70.

18. Richard Krupp, Time Out, 30 September, 1977.

19. As Time Goes By, Scene 9, p. 47.

20. Noel Greig, Dear Love of Comrades (London, 1977), p. 142.

21. W. Stephen Gilbert, Plays and Players, November, 1977, pp. 28-29.

22. Nicholas de Jongh, The Guardian, 5 July, 1979.

23. Gay Sweatshop, Care and Control, scripted by Michelene Wandor, Act 2, Scene 22, p. 112. (Quotes taken from Strike While the Iron is Hot, edited by Michelene Wandor (London, 1980).)

24. Care and Control, Act 2, Scene 23, p. 113.

25. The group changed their name in early 1986 to OutCast Theatre Company.

26. Consenting Adults in Public, Information Pamphlet.

27. Consenting Adults in Public, Information Pamphlet.

28. These shows were called It's An Unfair Cop, Guv and The Law Strikes Back. The Police and Criminal Evidence Bill is now law and 'sexual offences' (however minor) are included in the list of serious crimes for which the police have the right to detain a suspect without charge for up to 72 hours.

29. Anita Bryant is a strident, right-wing campaigner from Florida, whose supporters invented the Christian slogan, 'Kill A Queer For Christ'.

30. A clause prohibiting local authorities from 'promoting' homosexuality. See pp. 374/6 for more details.

CHAPTER NINE

1. Robert Patrick, The Haunted Host (London, 1972), Scene 1, pp. 98-99. (Quotes taken from Homosexual Acts, edited by Ed Berman.)

2. Ruby Cohn, New American Dramatists: 1960 - 1980 (London, 1982), p. 125.

3. New American Dramatists, p. 125.

4. The Haunted Host, Scene 1, p. 96.

5. For a more detailed history of modern drag, see Men in Frocks

by Kris Kirk and Ed Heath (London, 1984).

6. These songs are not in print at the time of writing and all lyrics are therefore quoted from memory.

7. See Note 6.

8. See Note 6.

9. Michel Tremblay, Hosanna (Vancouver, 1973), Act 1, p. 9.

10. Hosanna, Act 1, p. 11.

11. J. Tinker, Daily Mail, 28 October, 1981.

12. Hosanna, Act 1, p. 7.

13. Hosanna, Act 1, p. 39.

14. Hosanna, Act 1, p. 67.

15. Hosanna, Act 2, p. 98.

16. Hosanna, Act 1, p. 66.

17. Hosanna, Act 1, p. 67.

18. Hosanna, Act 2, p. 98.

19. Hosanna, Act 2, p. 98.

20. Hosanna, Act 2, p. 102.

21. Hosanna, Act 2, p. 92.

22. George Oppenheimer, Financial Times, 2 November, 1974.

23. Douglas Watt, New York Daily News, 15 October, 1974.

24. Martin Gottfried, New York Post, 15 October, 1974.

25. Rosalind Carne, The Times, 28 October, 1981.

26. Rosalind Carne, The Times, 28 October, 1981.

CHAPTER TEN

1. Some attempt must be made to define 'naturalism' and 'realism'. Purists will argue that 'naturalism' should only be applied to plays written at the turn of the century, works which tried to approach human behaviour as a physical scientist might approach a natural phenomenon. However, such a narrow definition is extremely limiting, especially as some of the works which were consciously written to belong to this genre (for example, Strindberg's The Father) are now regarded as being far from realistic in nature. I have used 'naturalistic', therefore, to describe the

desire of modern drama, and particularly British drama, to capture real life on stage. A new form of naturalism has arisen over the last decade which breaks the old, formal constraints of fourth-wall naturalism (it may include song and soliloquy and take place on a bare stage) and yet still attempts to depict real events. In other words, although it is more loosely constructed, it is built on similar assumptions: that the purpose of drama is to depict 'real' people in situations they might come across in 'real' life.

I have endeavoured to restrict the phrase 'realism' to those 'well-made' plays of an earlier age, works written in three solid acts to be performed in a box set.

2. One exception is The Palace Theatre in Westcliff-on-Sea, which has produced Rents, Coming Clean, Bent, Privates on Parade and Staircase during the 1980s.

3. Jane Chambers, A Late Snow (New York, 1974), Act 1, p. 308. (Quotes taken from Gay Plays, The First Collection.)

4. A Late Snow, Act 2, p. 332.

5. Martin Sherman, Introduction to Passing By in Gay Plays (London, 1984).

6. Introduction to Passing By.

7. Passing By, Act 1, Scene 5, p. 110.

8. Passing By, Act 1, Scene 5, p. 110.

9. Passing By, Act 2, Scene 4, p. 118.

10. Introduction to Passing By.

11. Introduction to Passing By.

12. Nicholas de Jongh, The Guardian, 21 April, 1982.

13. Michael Wilcox, Accounts (London, 1984), Part 2, p. 154.
(Quotes taken from Gay Plays.)

14. Kevin Elyot, Coming Clean (London, 1984), Scene 1, p. 9.

15. Coming Clean, Scene 1, p. 13.

16. Coming Clean, Scene 4, p. 45.

17. John Barker, Daily Telegraph, 6 November, 1982.

18. Michael Wilcox, Introduction to Gay Plays.

19. Introduction to Gay Plays.

20. Milton Shulman, Evening Standard, 21 April, 1982.

21. Milton Shulman, Evening Standard, 21 April, 1982.

22. Introduction to Gay Plays.

23. John Elsom, Mail on Sunday, 7 November, 1982.

24. Irving Wardle, The Times, 8 November, 1982.

25. Charles Spencer, Evening Standard, 6 November, 1982.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1. Martin Sherman, Bent (Ashover, 1979), Act 1, Scene 3, p. 24.

2. Bent, Act 2, Scene 5, p. 72.

3. Bent, Act 2, Scene 2, p. 58.

4. Peter Nichols, Privates on Parade (London, 1977), Act 2, Scene 8, p. 95.

5. Privates on Parade, Act 1, Scene 3, p. 24.

6. Privates on Parade, Act 1, Scene 5, p. 32.

7. Ronald Harwood, The Dresser (Ambergate, 1980), Act 1, p. 33.

8. The Dresser, Act 1, p. 47.

9. The Dresser, Act 1, p. 33.

10. The Dresser, Act 2, p. 95.

11. Julian Mitchell, Another Country (London, 1982), Act 1, Scene 3, p. 35.

12. Another Country, Act 2, Scene 6, p. 93.

13. Another Country, Act 2, Scene 6, p. 95.

14. Another Country, Act 2, Scene 6, p. 95.

15. A Patriot For Me, Act 2, Scene 1, p. 82.

16. A Patriot For Me, Act 2, Scene 2, p. 92.

17. Neil Simon, The Gingerbread Lady (New York, 1971), Act 1, p. 5.

18. The Gingerbread Lady, Act 1, p. 21.

19. The Gingerbread Lady, Act 3, p. 77.

CHAPTER TWELVE

1. David Mercer, A Superstition (London, 1977), Act 1, Scene 3.

2. A Superstition, Act 1, Scene 5.

3. A Superstition, Act 1, Scene 3.

4. The text of More Lives Than One is not available at the time of writing. All quotes are therefore taken from a video-recording of the broadcast.

5. See Note 4.

6. See Note 4.

7. See Note 4.

8. See Note 4.

9. See Note 4.

10. The text of The Other Other Woman is not available at the time of writing. All quotes are therefore taken from a tape recording of the broadcast.

11. See Note 10.

12. See Note 10.

13. The film of A Patriot For Me is called Colonel Redl.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

1. City Limits, 14 September, 1984.

2. Oscar Moore, Time Out, 13 September, 1984.

3. No text of Go-Go Boys was available at the time of writing, so quotes are given from memory.

4. See Note 3.

5. See Note 3.

6. See Note 3.

7. See Note 3.

8. See Note 3.

9. See Note 3.

10. See Note 3.

11. Any Lipman, City Limits, 21 September, 1984.

12. No text of Pornography was available at the time of writing, so quotes are given from memory.

13. See Note 12.

14. See Note 12.

15. See Note 12.

16. See Note 12.

17. Charles Spencer, The Stage, 27 September, 1984.

18. Charles Spencer, The Stage, 27 September, 1984.

19. Martin Hoyle, Financial Times, 14 February, 1984.

20. Noel Greig, Poppies (London, 1985), p. 45.

21. Poppies, p. 40.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

1. Larry Kramer, The Normal Heart (New York, 1985), Act 1, Scene 7, p. 25.

2. The Normal Heart, Act 1, Scene 5, p. 19.

3. The Normal Heart, Act 2, Scene 9, p. 29.

4. The Normal Heart, Act 1, Scene 6, p. 24.

5. The Normal Heart, Act 2, Scene 13, p. 42.

6. The Normal Heart, Act 1, Scene 5, p. 20.

7. The Normal Heart, Act 2, Scene 8, p. 27.

8. The Normal Heart, Act 2, Scene 9, p. 30.

9. The Normal Heart, Act 2, Scene 16, p. 44.

10. William M. Hoffman, As Is (New York, 1985), p. 27.

11. As Is, p. 28.

12. As Is, p. 16.

13. As Is, p. 17.

14. As Is, p. 57.

15. As Is, p. 13.

16. As Is, p. 41.

17. As Is, p. 57.

18. As Is, p. 49.

19. As Is, p. 36.

20. Sue Jameson, London Broadcasting, 25 March, 1986.

21. Jim Hiley, The Listener, 3 April, 1986.

22. Kenneth Hurren, The Mail on Sunday, 30 August, 1987.

23. Jim Hiley, The Listener, 10 September, 1987.

24. Paul Taylor, The Independent, 27 August, 1987.

25. Victoria Radin, New Statesman, 4 September, 1987.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PLAY-TEXTS

Ackerley, J.R., The Prisoners of War (London, 1925)

Aeschylus, The Oresteia, translated by Gilbert Murray (Woking, 1928

Albee, E., The Zoo Story (New York, 1960)

Anderson, R., Tea and Sympathy (New York, 1953)

Aristophanes, Lysistrata, translated by A. Sommerstein (Harmondsworth, 1973)

Behan, B., The Hostage (Chatham, 1958)

Bourdet, E., The Captive, translated by Arthur Hornblow, Jr. (New York, 1926)

Bond, E., Stone (London, 1976)

Brenton, H., The Romans in Britain (London, 1980)

Chambers, J., A Late Snow (New York, 1974)

Collinson, L., Thinking Straight (London, 1975)

Coward, N., The Vortex (London, 1925)

Crowley, M., The Boys In The Band (Harmondsworth, 1968)

Delaney, S., A Taste Of Honey (London, 1959)

Duberman, M., Male Armor (New York, 1975)

Dyer, C., Staircase (Harmondsworth, 1966)

Elyot, K., Coming Clean (London, 1984)

Euripides, The Bacchae, translated by P. Vellacott (Harmondsworth, 1954)

Feiffer, J., Little Murders (New York, 1968)

Fierstein, H., Torch Song Trilogy (New York, 1981)

Gay Sweatshop, Care and Control, scripted by Michelene Wandor (London, 1980)

Gellert, R., Quaint Honour (London, 1958)

Genet, J., Deathwatch, translated by B. Frechtman (London, 1951)

Genet, J., The Maids, translated by B. Frechtman (London, 1957)

Goetz, R. and A., The Immoralist (New York, 1954)

Green, J., South (London, 1955)

Greig, N., Dear Love Of Comrades (London, 1979)

Greig, N., Poppies (London, 1983)

Greig, N. and Griffiths, D., As Time Goes By (London, 1977)

Griffiths, D. and Baker, R., Mister X (London, 1984)

Hart, M., Lady In The Dark (New York, 1941)

Harwood, R., The Dresser (Ambergate, 1980)

Hellman, L., The Children's Hour (New York, 1934)

Herbert, J., Fortune and Men's Eyes (New York, 1967)

Hoffman, W.M., As Is (New York, 1985)

Hoffman, W.M. and Holland, A., Cornbury (New York, 1976)

Home, W.D., Now Barabbas (London, 1947)

Jones, L., The Toilet (New York, 1966)

Kenward, A., Cry Havoc (New York, 1940)

King, P., Serious Charge (London, 1955)

Kramer, L., The Normal Heart (New York, 1985)

Levin, I., Deathtrap (London, 1978)

Ludlam, C., Bluebeard (New York, 1972)

Ludlam, C., Turds In Hell (New York, 1970)

McClenagh, T., Submariners (London, 1984)

Mailer, N., The Deer Park (New York, 1955)

Marcus, F., The Killing Of Sister George (London, 1965)

Marlowe, C., Edward II, edited by J.B. Steane (Harmondsworth, 1969

Mercer, D., A Superstition (London, 1977)

Miller, A., A View From The Bridge (London, 1957)

Miller, S., Confessions Of A Female Disorder (New York, 1973)

Mitchell, J., Another Country (Ambergate, 1982)

Nichols, P., Privates On Parade (London, 1977)

O'Neill, E., Strange Interlude (London, 1928)

Orton, J., Entertaining Mr Sloane (London, 1964)

Orton, J., Loot (London, 1967)

Orton, J., What The Butler Saw (London, 1969)

Osborne, J., A Patriot For Me (London, 1965)

Osborne, J., Inadmissible Evidence (London, 1965)

Otway, T., The Hidden Years (London, 1947)

Patrick, R., Fred and Harold (London, 1972)

Patrick, R., The Haunted Host (London, 1972)

Patrick, R., T-Shirts (New York, 1978)

Posener, J., Any Woman Can (London, 1984)

Powys, S., Wise Tomorrow (London, 1937)

Sartre, J-P., Huis Clos, translated by Stuart Gilbert (London, 194

Scott, B., The Lambs Of God (Manuscript, Mitchell Library, Glasgow

Shaffer, P., Five Finger Exercise (London, 1958)

Shairp, M., The Green Bay Tree (London, 1933)

Shakespeare, W., As You Like It, edited by A.W. Verity (London, 1899)

Shakespeare, W., Richard II, edited by A. Harbage (New York, 1969)

Sherman, M., Bent (Ashover, 1979)

Sherman, M., Passing By (New York, 1984)

Simon, N., The Gingerbread Lady (New York, 1971)

Kaufman, G.S. and McGrath, L., The Small Hours (New York, 1951)

Solly, B. and Ward, D., Boy Meets Boy (New York, 1975)

Tavel, R., Gorilla Queen (New York, 1969)

Tavel, R., The Life Of Lady Godiva (New York, 1968)

Tavel, R., The Ovens of Anita Orangejuice (New York, 1978)

Tremblay, M., Hosanna (Vancouver, 1973)

Vanbrugh, J., The Relapse, edited by B. Harris (London, 1971)

Wakeman, A., Ships (London, 1975)

Wedekind, F., Earth Spirit, translated by S. Spender (London, 1952)

Wedekind, F., Pandora's Box, translated by S. Spender (London, 1952)

Wedekind, F., Spring Awakening, translated by T. Osborn (London, 1969)

Whitemore, H., Breaking The Code (Oxford, 1987)

Wilde, O., The Ideal Husband, edited by H. Pearson (London, 1961)

Wilde, O., Lady Windermere's Fan, edited by H. Pearson (London, 196

Wilde, O., Salome, edited by H. Pearson (London, 1961)

Wilde, O., A Woman Of No Importance, edited by H. Pearson (London, 1961)

Wilcox, M., Accounts (London, 1984)

Wilcox, M., Massage (London, 1987)

Wilcox, M., Rents (London, 1983)

Williams, N., W.C.P.C. (London, 1983)

Williams, T., Camino Real (Harmondsworth, 1950)

Williams, T., Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (London, 1962)

Williams, T., A Streetcar Named Desire (New York, 1947)

Williams, T., Suddenly Last Summer (London, 1962)

Winsloe, C., Children In Uniform, (English adaptation by Barbara Barnham), (London, 1932)

OTHER WORKS

Abbott, S. and Love, B., Sappho Was A Right-On Woman (New York, 1972)

Altman, D., Coming Out In The Seventies (Sydney, 1979)

Altman, D., Homosexual Oppression And Liberation (London, 1971)

Altman, D., The Homosexualization of America (Boston, 1982)

Babuscio, J., We Speak For Ourselves (London, 1976)

Bell, P. and Weinberg, M.S., Homosexualities, A Study Of Diversity Among Men And Women (London, 1978)

Berger, R., Gay and Gray (Boston, 1982)

Borhek, M., Coming Out To Parents (New York, 1983)

Boswell, J. (editor), Christianity, Social Tolerance And Homosexuality (Chicago, 1980)

Bray, A., Homosexuality in Renaissance England (London, 1982)

Brome, V., Havelock Ellis, Philosopher Of Sex (London, 1979)

Bronski, M., Culture Clash: The Making Of Gay Sensibility (Boston, 1984)

Burton, P., Parallel Lives (London, 1985)

Cohn, R., New American Dramatists: 1960 - 1980 (London, 1982)

Collective Authorship, The Law And Sexuality (Manchester, 1978)

Collective Authorship, Psychiatry And The Homosexual (London, 1978)

Curtin, K., We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians (Boston, 1987)

Dannecker, M., Theories Of Homosexuality (London, 1981)

De Beauvoir, S., The Second Sex (Harmondsworth, 1949)

De Becker, R., The Other Face Of Love, translated by M. Crossland and A. Daventry (London, 1967)

De Cecco, J. (editor), Bashers, Baiters And Bigots (New York, 1985)

D'Emilio, J., Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities (Chicago, 1983)

Dover, K.J., Greek Homosexuality (London, 1978)

Dublin Lesbian and Gay Men's Collective, Out For Ourselves (Dublin, 1986)

Ernst, M.L. and Loth, D., Sexual Behaviour And The Kinsey Report (London, 1949)

Ettorre, E.M., Lesbians, Women And Society (London, 1980)

Faderman, L., Surpassing The Love Of Men (New York, 1981)

Fernbach, D., The Spiral Path (London, 1981)

Foucault, M., The History of Sexuality (London, 1979)

Freedman, E.B. (editor), The Lesbian Issue (Chicago, 1982)

Fricke, A., Reflections Of A Rock Lobster (Boston, 1981)

Galloway, B. (editor), Prejudice And Pride (London, 1983)

Geddes, D.P. (editor), An Analysis Of The Kinsey Reports On Sexual Behaviour (New York, 1954)

Gough, J. and Macnair, M., Gay Liberation In The Eighties (London, 1985)

Grahn, J., Another Mother Tongue (Boston, 1984)

Greer, G., The Female Eunuch (St. Albans, 1971)

Hall, R., The Well Of Loneliness (London, 1928)

Hanscombe, G.E. and Forster, J., Rocking The Cradle: Lesbian Mothers (London, 1981)

Hanscombe, G.E. and Humphries, M., (editors), Heterosexuality (London, 1987)

Harry, J., Gay Couples (New York, 1984)

Hart, J. and Richardson, D., The Theory and Practice of Homosexuality (London, 1981)

Harvey, I., To Fall Like Lucifer (London, 1971)

Honore, T., Sex Law (London, 1978)

Humphreys, L., Tearoom Trade (Chicago, 1970)

Hyde, H.M., The Cleveland Street Scandal (London, 1976)

Hyde, H.M., The Other Love (London, 1970)

Hyde, H.M. (editor), Trials of Oscar Wilde (London, 1948)

International Association of Lesbians, Gay Women and Gay Men, Pink Book, 85 (Den Haag, 1985)

Jackson, E. and Persky, S. (editors), Flaunting It! (Vancouver, 1982)

Karlen, A., Sexuality And Homosexuality (London, 1971)

Kirk, K. and Heath, E., Men In Frocks (London, 1984)

Lahr, J., Prick Up Your Ears (Harmondsworth, 1978)

Lahr, J. (editor), The Orton Diaries (London, 1986)

Lauritsen, J. and Thorstad, D., The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (New York, 1974)

McCall, A., The Medieval Underworld (London, 1979)

McWhirter, D. and Mattison, A., The Male Couple (New York, 1984)

Masters, W. and Johnson, V., Homosexuality In Perspective (New York, 1979)

Mieli, M., Homosexuality and Liberation, translated by David Fernbach (London, 1980)

Millett, K., Sexual Politics (London, 1971)

Mitchell, P. (editor), Pink Triangles (Boston, 1980)

Mitzel, The Boston Sex Scandal (Boston, 1980)

Morgan, E., The Descent of Woman (London, 1972)

Mort, F., Dangerous Sexualities (London, 1987)

Muchmore, W. and Hanson, W., Coming Along Fine (Boston, 1986)

Norris, S. and Read, C., Out In The Open (London, 1985)

Pearsall, R., Public Purity, Private Shame: Victorian Sexual Hypocrisy Exposed (London, 1976)

Plant, R., The Pink Triangle (Edinburgh, 1987)

Plato, The Symposium, translated by W. Hamilton (Harmondsworth, 1951)

Plummer, K. (editor), The Making Of The Modern Homosexual (London, 1981)

Ponse, B., Identities In The Lesbian World (Westport, 1978)

Rechy, J., The Sexual Outlaw (Norwich, 1978)

Major-General Frank M. Richardson, Mars Without Venus (Edinburgh, 1981)

Ross, M., The Married Homosexual Man (London, 1983)

Rowse, A.L., Homosexuals In History (London, 1977)

Ruitenbeck, H., The New Sexuality (New York, 1974)

Seabrook, J., A Lasting Relationship (London, 1976)

Stern, M. and Stern, A., Sex In The Soviet Union, translated by Marc Heine (London, 1981)

Stewart-Park, A. and Cassidy, J., We're Here (London, 1977)

Taylor, N. (editor), All In A Day's Work (London, 1986)

Trenchard, L. and Warren, H., Something To Tell You (London, 1984)

Trevisan, J.S., Perverts In Paradise, translated by Martin Foreman (London, 1986)

Tsang, D. (editor), The Age Taboo (Boston, 1981)

Uhrig, L.J., Sex Positive (Boston, 1986)

Vacha, K., Quiet Fire: Memoirs of Older Gay Men (New York, 1985)

Von Fraunheim, R., Army of Lovers (London, 1980)

Weeks, J., Coming Out (London, 1977)

Weinberg, G., Society and the Healthy Homosexual (Gerrards Cross, 197

West, D.J., Homosexuality (Harmondsworth, 1955)

White, E., States of Desire: Travels In Gay America (London, 1980)

Wolff, C., Bisexuality, A Study (London, 1977)

Wolff, C., Magnus Hirschfeld (New York, 1986)

Wolff, C., Love Between Women (London, 1971)

Wolf, D.G., The Lesbian Community (Los Angeles, 1979)

Young, A., Gays Under The Cuban Revolution (San Francisco, 1981)

Young, W., Eros Denied (New York, 1964)

This thesis is presented following the style rules set out in the MHRA Style Book, Modern Humanities Research Association, 1981.